

Accidental Greening

By Cedar Burnett | Published 04/5/2008 | Projects |

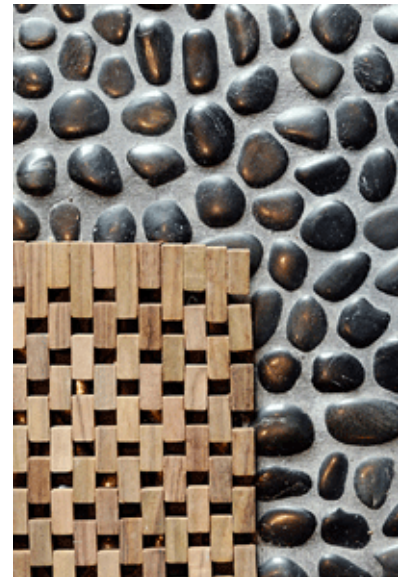
The Dilemma

When it comes to buying green, many of us get lost in an idealist quagmire of striving for perfection. Terrified of being party to "greenwashing" scams, we poke at claims of environmentalism with skepticism. It's not enough to be greener, we surmise, when we should be looking for the greenest. The major problem with this philosophy is that it leaves little room for celebrating the small steps that add up to great change. As Voltaire said, "the perfect is the enemy of the good" - words we should take to heart when we're beating ourselves up for not buying local, organic celery when simply local celery was \$2 cheaper.

Building green, like much of the ever-widening green movement, falls very much under this curse of perfectionism. In a utopian world, everything we purchased, ate or lived in would be environmentally sound. We're not there yet though, so every step we take toward that ultimate goal is a positive step. Everything from swapping the lights in our homes for compact fluorescent bulbs to planting drought-resistant landscaping makes a difference. The cumulative effect of our actions today-both positive and negative-will determine the health of the planet far into the future.



One local homeowner decided to build small and called on Ballard builder/remodeler, Axiom Design/Build, to create an airy, open-feeling home for him in Whatcom County. The owner had picked up a steep lot in a gated community outside Bellingham, but wanted to stray far from the typical gated community-style home. As the owner of his own construction company that focuses on land development and native habitat restoration, the owner wanted the home to blend seamlessly with the elements and open to the outdoors. He asked Axiom to create



With this in mind, there are many ways to build green, but one great way is to build small. By building or buying a small home, you can reduce your carbon footprint and lower your construction and energy-usage costs all in one fell swoop, even without making any other changes.

a funky, budget-conscious, small-scale home that took advantage of the natural landscape with the caveat that there must be room for entertaining small and large groups, and adequate space to house visiting friends from Seattle.



Office loft



Master Builders Association and Built Green member, Axiom took on the challenge, designing a modern, 1,200 foot, one-story steel structure pinned into the bedrock on the steep slope. The interior of the home was conceived as one large, open space with a series of boxes inside and high ceilings to add to the open feel. Within the space, the kitchen, living room and dining room blended together for maximum flexibility; and by using this open floor plan, the home could be completely versatile. Rather than opting for the traditional model of assigning function to separate, closed-off rooms, this home design could accommodate different events and usage simply by moving furniture around.

The ceiling height was exploited with the inclusion of a sleeping loft/office accessed by an old, reclaimed ladder that added visual detail as well as practicality. And the outdoors were incorporated by installing a large deck with long glass and aluminum slider doors that could open the entire side of the house to the natural landscape.

The budget consciousness melded beautifully with environmental consciousness, as salvaged and eco-friendly materials made their way into nearly every corner of the home. The floor used throughout was a six-inch concrete slab chosen for its passive solar heating properties. The house was angled in such a way as to allow the slab to collect the sun's heat during the day and radiate it back when the sun went down.



Clawfoot tub in master bath

The homeowner had also expressed a desire for a wooden ceiling, so rather than use traditional wood, Axiom suggested using strawboard, a material made from recycled wheat straw that gives the warmth of more traditional wood but is considerably cheaper and more sustainable. The sunny strawboard was then coated in OS hardwax, a low VOC finish that brought out the natural quality of the straw. The interior doors were also salvaged gems from Madison Middle School that were purchased from Re Store. The doors arrived stained with ugly brown paint, so the owner and his girlfriend spent many laborious hours stripping the gorgeous old-growth fir.

A reclaimed clawfoot tub made its way into the master bathroom, nestled over a pebble stone floor for a lush, contrasting materials aesthetic. The main bathroom also received enviro-friendly touches, with a low-flow shower, dual-flush toilet and exposed concrete walls. The loft was fitted with Marmoleum floors and Energy Star appliances were used throughout.

Even the outside of the house received flashy, inexpensive and environmentally-friendly touches with cement board panels held by exposed corrugated metal fasteners, and a metal roof rounding out the exterior.

Perhaps the most intriguing element of this project was that the owner of the home hadn't set out to specifically build a Built Green home. But with Axiom suggesting cost-effective, cool-looking green options for every aspect of the home, it was hard to resist. As the house was being built, it kept getting greener and greener. And by the end, it was certainly pretty darn green by any estimation. That's the funny thing about small steps-before you know it, they've added up to one giant leap.