



The Green Scene

Eco-construction starts from the ground up

By Meg Barone

The source of the quote – “We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors; we borrow it from our children” – is ambiguous at best. It may have originated from a Native American chief. Some claim it’s an Amish proverb. Others credit it to poet and Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson.

No one seems to know for sure who said it or when. What is not in question is its sentiment. A growing number of people are taking seriously their responsibility to the planet and the legacy they will leave to future generations, and that is reflected in the growing interest in environmentally friendly residential construction and renovation.

An eco-friendly or green house can have many interpretations. For some it’s simply about caulking to create airtight windows to save on fuel bills. For others it’s about using toxin-free caulks and paints to help save the planet. Others think it goes well beyond the use of recycled materials, functionality and maintenance of a home’s systems, and water conservation. There are varying levels of “green” construction and building industry certifications.

“A green home takes the environment into consideration by using resources efficiently throughout the building process, thereby minimizing environmental impact,” according to the website for Certified Green Builders of Stamford.

Homeowners are looking for energy-efficient, toxin-free residences, several Fairfield County builders said. Whether they plan to renovate an existing house or build new, they want to eliminate chemicals, maximize energy-efficiency, preserve natural resources, minimize fossil fuel usage, and reduce their carbon footprint, all without sacrificing their modern amenities or level of comfort.

The kitchen cabinetry and floor of this eco-friendly New Canaan home were made from reclaimed wood. The kitchen counters are IceStone, a combination of recycled glass and cement, and the appliances are “beyond Energy Star-rated,” according to the home’s owner.

Ellen Kantor/Contributed photo



In addition to being eco-friendly, this Adirondack-style colonial home boasts front meadows comprised of only native plants – no invasive species.

Ellen Kantor/Contributed photo



Davenport Contracting restored a Redding barn – using recyclable materials, geothermal heating and cooling and spray foam insulation – for use as a music studio.

Davenport Contracting/Contributed photos

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Eco-friendly houses are more expensive to build than a typical house of the same size, according to Peter Fusaro of Preferred Builders in Old Greenwich. Fusaro said the average cost of green construction is 8 to 10 percent more, but the initial expense is offset by its energy efficiency. Fusaro's company has won numerous green building awards and certifications – including the distinction for having built the second house in the country to earn the U.S. Department of Energy Challenge Home certification for the home at 23 Brown House Road in Old Greenwich, constructed in 2012. That house produces more energy than it needs and sells unused energy back to a utility company.

Environmental awareness may be the prime motivator but also at play is increasing concern about health and allergies and how the presence of toxins in building materials, carpeting, furniture and furnishings is affecting a home's inhabitants, Fusaro said. Today's standard building practices and improved building technologies have made it easier for contractors to construct greener houses overall.

"A lot of the building we're doing now is based on new technologies that are greener," said Brian MacDonald, owner and CEO of Davenport Contracting Fine Homebuilders and Renovators in Stamford. MacDonald said most of their projects have involved construction of houses with geo-thermal systems. "Geo-thermal heat

pumps heat and cool buildings by concentrating the naturally-existing heat contained within the earth – a clean, reliable, and renewable source of energy," according to the U.S. Department of Energy website.

New technologies contributing to greener houses include greater amounts of insulation, which tighten the interior envelop so that hot air doesn't escape and cold air doesn't get inside during winter months. The tighter

envelop then requires better air filtration often leading to installation of energy recovery ventilator systems. ERV systems provide constantly circulated fresh air throughout a house by drawing air from outside and pumping it inside. Chris O'Dell of O-Living Experience LLC, a Westport design and building company, said "It's like keeping your windows open year round, minus the allergens, pollution and temperature differentials."



*"A house can
be beautiful and
sustainable. You
don't have to sacrifice
one for the other."*

Etta Kantor,
Environmental activist and
New Canaan homeowner



This Redding property with its multiple buildings – including the music barn on the previous pages – has been recognized with numerous design awards.

Davenport Contracting/Contributed photos

Additionally, most windows installed in houses today are double-insulated. “We are rarely using single-glazed windows except for decorative purposes,” MacDonald said.

Many companies are constructing and renovating houses with engineered lumber or specially grown sustainable lumber rather than forested wood, and they are installing specialized systems to hold water on properties to prevent run-off and utilize that water for irrigation.

Although some environmentally friendly measures are becoming standard, some homeowners prefer extreme green features. Environmental activist Etta Kantor dramatically reduced her family’s carbon footprint and said, as a mother and grandmother, she has dedicated her life to illuminating what humans have done to adversely affect the environment and what they can do to mitigate the damage. “I want to be part of the solution, not part of the problem,” said Kantor,

a member of what she calls the “planetarian movement,” which comprises humanitarians who care about Planet Earth.

A decade ago Kantor and her husband, the late Nate Kantor, were living in a 10,000-square-foot house in Weston. She convinced Nate to build a completely sustainable Adirondack-style colonial house, half the size of their Weston home. Every inch was carefully considered and artfully designed to minimize impact on the environment without sacrificing comfort or luxury inside or out, Kantor said.

The resulting LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) Platinum-certified, 12-room house at 482 Trinity Pass Road in New Canaan, which is now on the market for \$2,899,000, harnesses the sun’s power. Photovoltaic solar panels on the property produce electricity. Thermal-voltaic solar panels on the roof produce heat. Kantor said their utility bill was just over \$1,200 last year and that included charging her electric car.

This multiple award-winning house was built with reclaimed materials and Forest Stewardship Council-certified wood harvested from sustainably managed forests. It has a gray water system that uses water from sinks and the washing machine to flush toilets. There is also a special odorless compost toilet in the master bedroom suite.

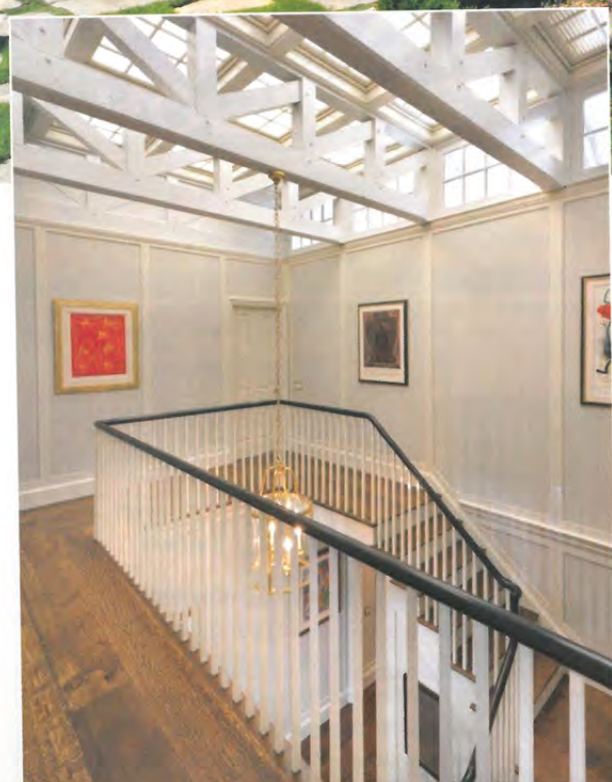
Outside, the property is designed on permaculture, which Kantor defines as “living in harmony with nature.” Only indigenous species that are good for local birds and butterflies were planted. Rain chains replace gutters and capture water in cisterns to irrigate the property. Even the in-ground swimming pool is sanitized using an ionized water system, which requires no chlorine or other chemicals, she said.

But it’s not necessary to do it all, MacDonald said. Even implementing some green features can make a difference.

“You don’t have to build a home that is at the very cutting edge of green building to achieve significant benefits. You can build as green as fits your needs and objectives best,” according to the Wilton-based BPC Green Builders website.

Whatever a homeowner does “Demonstrates you care about the world your kids and grandkids will inherit,” the website notes.

Meg Barone is a freelance writer for Hearst Connecticut Media.



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