



Earth Inspirations

by Anna Bjorklund

A desire to create a healthy space for her daughter who struggles with allergies and an affinity for unique materials led Big Sky homeowner Jacquie Person to incorporate several “green” products in her new house. With a myriad of personal values and motives, many homeowners like Persons have recently discovered a whole world of construction, design and material alternatives.

Commonly understood as building approaches that enhance a structure’s efficiency and the health of its occupants, along with decreasing the structure’s overall impact on the environment, “green building” is growing increasingly

common in Montana and around the nation.

That’s encouraging to Dave Schaub, Co-owner of Refuge, a sustainable building supply center in Bozeman. “People are becoming more aware of both environmental impact and the health impact of material choices in the building process.”

By far, some of the most common products that Schaub sees heading out the door are wall treatments, including earth-based plasters and paints that contain no Volatile Organic Compounds (VOC’s). Affordable and fairly easy, one of the most common homeowner projects is to paint the nursery before a new baby arrives, he shared. “Paint is a real easy entry point into this whole green product field.”

It certainly was for Persons, who chose to use no-VOC paints with her daughter in mind. The impact on air quality was immediately noticed during the finishing process. “On any given day you could walk in and think ‘Are the painters here?’” There are barely any fumes with such products.

Persons also limited the use of carpet, opting for non-traditional flooring treatments including cork, which she found especially impressive. “You can get cork in a million designs, and it’s softer to stand on if you’re doing dishes.” She also noticed that it has stood up well to wear and is naturally mildew and bacteria resistant, all pluses for her family.

“This is something the homeowner is doing to improve their own health or a commitment to their own environmental philosophy,” explained Schaub. He sees a mix of remodeling homeowners as well as builders and architects who are often sent in to research a material for a client. An increasing number of contractors are looking into green materials and design of their own volition though, he said. “There’s satisfaction that comes from manufacturing high-quality, high efficiency construction.”

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The concept of energy efficiency is no new thing to Steve Loken, Missoula builder and founder of the Center for Resourceful Building Technology. It can often be unpopular to discuss “using less,” he shared. But he’s found incredible satisfaction in facing that challenge himself. “I’m a builder, I consume energy... how do I minimize my ecological footprint?”

For Loken it has translated into focusing primarily on restoration and remodeling projects, taking existing structures, utilizing the materials already present and transforming the building into an energy efficient structure. He noted that, in terms of environmental impact, earth-friendly materials are fine, but the impact of a structure’s energy efficiency-- its long-term fuel consumption-- is far greater.

One of Loken’s earliest Missoula clients, Mike Hardy, has personally benefited from Loken’s principals. Hardy and his wife Mabelle, have lived in their highly energy efficient home since 1984. The construction included careful insulation, the use of a vapor barrier, and a ventilation system that uses stable underground temperature to pre-heat or cool air depending on the season.

“The only heat we have is baseboard electric and a freestanding space heater in the living room,” said Hardy who first became aware of insulation and heating alternatives when his son took a course on it. “It was in the early 80’s and people were just becoming aware of that. We thought it would be great to have a house that wasn’t consuming so much.”

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