

News

New Hartford's Convention-Defying House to Open Doors

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By Max Wittstein

NEW HARTFORD—A local family that defied accepted wisdom by proving it's possible to live both green and luxuriously will open its doors to visitors April 10 as part of a solar house tour sponsored by the group People's Action for Clean Energy (PACE),

On their woodsy lot in the Bakerville section of New Hartford, Jeremy Schaller and Karann Brandt built an attractive, 2,700-square-foot eco-friendly home. It's a far cry from both the McMansions that were popular during the housing boom and the futuristic designs envisioned in the 70s for ultra-efficient houses.

Indeed, the Schaller Eco Home is more along the lines of a traditional New England Colonial, with a barn shape and a cupola on the roof. From the inside, it resembles a hip loft in SoHo with its large, open spaces and spare stairwell.

"We liked the idea of having something very traditional," said Ms. Brandt, who moved here with her husband in 1999 and has two children. "The barn look fits the aesthetics we were trying to reach, while keeping the house inexpensive to build and maintain; any builder will tell you that the more angles you have in a home, the more you'll spend."

However, the mechanics of the home, which the couple moved into in September, are anything but traditional. With a roof covered with 38 photovoltaic solar panels, another row of panels in the backyard providing hot water for the house and a series of other energy-reducing designs, the couple has achieved a HERS (Home Energy Rating System) score of 4, as compared to 100 to 200 for a typical modern home.

Their house is one of 18 competitors in the Connecticut Zero Energy Challenge, a competition put on by Northeast Utilities to showcase zero-energy homes or those that come close to it.

Having moved to Connecticut from Oregon, the couple have been longtime enthusiasts of green energy. Ms. Brandt's background as an environmental engineer helped her and Mr. Schaller, a graphic designer who owns a sign making business in Torrington, to design and tweak the house after its shell was built. As the green building boom ramped up in recent years, they continued their research on home construction and designs that kept costs down.

"We were finding out that as the boom was going up, everyone was telling us it would cost twice as much money as a conventional home to do this, and we just didn't believe that," she said.

The home's construction costs and site impact were greatly reduced by using a prefabricated concrete foundation in a three-foot-thick bed of sand, which absorbs heat. Other cost-cutting and carbon footprint reducing-measures include purchasing much of their furniture, lighting and doors from salvage stores like Urban Miners in Hamden, and the nonprofit ReCONSTRUCTION Center in New Britain.

"Some people would consider us having no basement to be a sacrifice, but I don't like them anyway; and for that matter, I don't have a lot of junk I need to store," Ms. Brandt said. She added that the home lacks air conditioning, but only because they did not feel the need to install it because of the house's strong ventilation. While they haven't lived in the house during the high summer temperatures yet, Ms. Brandt said that as they were putting the finishing touches on in August, the house was entirely comfortable to be in.

The couple has also shown that they don't need to sacrifice luxury for greenness, with their recent installation of a hot tub. Ms. Brandt

hopes that with the current dreary economic climate, and Americans everywhere looking to spend less money to house themselves, their mode of construction will begin to look attractive.

"People will realize they don't have to build some funky recycled tire house but can still have one that's energy efficient, and you don't have to spend any more money," Ms. Brandt said. "Our goal was to keep it under \$125 a square foot. That's a tall order, especially for a custom built house; we were told we couldn't do it and we did anyway."

While the Brants love old houses as much as anyone and hope that they are saved as much as possible, Ms. Brandt says that it's difficult enough to retrofit one to meet standards for an average home, let alone the high ones for which green builders aim.

"Insulating is the toughest part, and the most important thing in any house," she said. "Retrofitting an old home to be tight and well insulated is really difficult. It can be done, with spray foam insulation, which is a great product, albeit very expensive. Old houses have those custom wood windows that are beautiful but leak like crazy. It can be done, but it's tough. That's why we decided to build."

The Schaller Eco Home will be featured in the 54th solar house tour sponsored by PACE, a volunteer Connecticut non-profit organization founded in 1973 to promote clean energy. Tickets are \$15 per person, and more information can be obtained by calling 860-623-5487.

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