

Greening Your House

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Sustainable design is too often a luxury, available only to a wealthy few. But Christopher Straka and Patric Langevin want to change that. Their company, Vert Design Inc., is an Ottawa-based green planning and design firm that aims to build sustainable and high-efficiency residential projects.

From the beginning, the two green designers made the commitment to making tomorrow better without compromising the quality of life today. In other words, they made a commitment to sustainable living. They aim at transforming spaces into places that help people better understand themselves and the environment around them.

North Americans housing choices are influenced by the environment. Seventeen percent of the energy consumed in Canada is used to operate our homes, and housing accounts for 16 percent of Canada's greenhouse gas emissions. According to the U.S. Energy Information Agency, homes and commercial buildings use 71 percent of the electricity in the United States.

Vert Design is entering its third year of operation, and Straka and Langevin are already completing their 24th residential project, most of which have been in eastern Ontario and western Quebec. They are offering a personalized approach to green building, as the majority of their clientele are home and condominium owners. They advise their clients on issues surrounding energy efficiency and material choice.

Christopher Straka explains that every client comes to Vert Design with a different definition of what green design means to him. The green advisors meet with their clients face to face, and usually insist on having this initial discussion at the homeowners' place, so that they can talk about the home in real terms. The first step is to identify what the client's goals are for the project. Then, they assist the client in coming up with a design solution. Green designers do not force a particular approach. This is what they call "custom design."

Most importantly, a green designer must check the regulations to see what is allowed in the neighbourhood in which the client lives.

They help the client select a contractor who is relatively comfortable with the types of specifications and recommendations that they make in their plan. Straka and Langevin make sure their work is done as it is designed while the building is under construction. They leave nothing to chance.

They insist that the cost of green design be the same as that of conventional design. They do admit that there was a time when green design may have been more expensive, but today it really is the same.

"One thing is different," they insist. "It is how we evaluate the cost of a green house. Vert Design encourages homeowners to look at the cost of building their home as well as the cost of maintaining it. It may be somewhat more expensive to build a green home than a conventional home. For instance, a conventional furnace is cheaper to install than an eco-friendly one. However, the heating cost in a conventional home is higher than a green home."

Going Green on a Budget

A green designer helps homeowners figure out how they can use the financial resources and the time that they have in the way that will serve them the best. However Christopher Straka makes it clear. "It's not because somebody doesn't spend the money on the absolutely best insulation that this person cannot have a green home," he states.

The price of a green home varies, of course, and it depends on the individual's goal. The reality is that the majority of homeowners have a tight budget. "The value of working with a firm like ours is for people to get the best deal for their money," says Straka

Though greening a home does require a minimum of funds, clients who have an extremely tight budget may not be able to invest in some materials and approaches. Moreover, Straka says that renters typically have less interest in investing in their apartment. These people may rely on the Internet and books to make their living environment green.

Everyone has a reason for owning a green home. For some homeowners, it's about healthy living. For others, it's about caring for the environment. A green home saves money on operating and maintenance costs. Energy-efficient appliances and lighting systems may result in lower costs to operate the home. A green home with water-conserving faucets, toilets, shower and a more efficient water heater may result in less water consumption. Moreover, installing photovoltaic panels for solar electricity is a long-term investment that reduces dependence on public utilities.

In Canada, homeowners who reduce their home's impact on the environment by improving its energy efficiency can qualify for federal grants through Natural Resources Canada. The maximum grant owners are entitled to receive per home or multi-unit residential building is \$5,000. Those earning many eligible properties can receive up to \$500,000 over the life of the program. The same applies to business residential property owners. In the United States, there are many financial incentives that can help make green homeownership even more affordable. The international Energy Star symbol helps consumers to identify energy-efficient products on the market. In Canada and in the United States, different level of governments offer rebates, tax credits and other incentives on the purchase of new Energy Star-labelled and qualified appliances.

A Green House: The New Norm

Christopher Straka and Patric Langevin are designing houses with an attitude towards their environment and their community. Green houses were non-conventional a decade ago; Straka believes that today, green houses are the new norm.

Straka remembers a time when green design was only done by very few. He thinks that the interest in green building has exploded in the last three years, and he sees an increasing number of green planners, engineer and designers in the region of the national capital. "But we can still count those people on two hands," he admits.

Still, he is convinced that eco-friendly houses have entered the mainstream, as he sees advertisements for green buses, cars, condominiums and green roofs on a daily basis. The National Association of Home Builders of the United States reported that 50 percent of builders are focusing their attention on green buildings.

Christopher Straka explains that their lives took various directions before they both went back to university. He holds a Master Degree in Environmental design, after earning degrees in Geography, Education, and Outdoor Recreation Parks and Tourism. His partner, Patric Langevin received his Master of Architecture from the University of Calgary's Faculty of Environmental Design.

The two designers have dedicated their careers to community building. For the last two years, they have transformed living environments into places that help people better understand themselves and the world around them.

After all, every Canadian contributes to five tons of CO₂ each year. Appliances, lighting, cooling and household heating account for half of those emissions.

What is a Green Home?

Straka and Langevin want to minimize the effects of construction. They consider nine environmental components in every residential project:

First – Low impact: Vert Design projects are eco-friendly, as both Straka and Langevin aim at minimizing the effects of construction.

Second – High-efficiency: In order to build homes, they use resources efficiently.

Third – Integrated: Their constructions become a part of the systems at play around them.

Fourth – Durable: A green home can last many decades.

Fifth – Adaptable: Their constructions could potentially serve multiple uses, if need be.

Sixth – Non-toxic: Straka and Langevin use only non-toxic products in order to protect the health of the residents and of the environment.

Seventh – Relevance: Every building has a purpose: it has to serve the needs of its owner.

Eighth – Functional: Vert Design constructions work and work well.

Ninth – Beautiful: Vert Design wants to build environmentally sensitive and aesthetically pleasing homes.

If you wish to know some more about greening your home, the following are some helpful links:

Vert Design <http://www.vertdesign.ca/>

Natural Resources Canada <http://www.nrcan-mcan.gc.ca/>

The NAHB National Green Building Program <http://www.nahbgreen.org/>

The Green Home Guide: <http://www.greenhomeguide.org/>