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Success stories: Chris Briley, Green Design Studio

2008-06-10



Derek Davis

Chris Briley at a Green Design Studio construction site in Cumberland.

At Green Design Studio in Yarmouth, Chris Briley practices something he calls "Architecture for Life."

The basic principle behind the philosophy is sustainability: durable, timeless, attractive buildings that are environmentally friendly, easy to maintain and economical to operate, while also reflecting the dreams and desires of their occupants. It's a tall order to be sure, but Briley, 37, believes that sustainable practices coupled with individualized design can benefit the environment and enhance the lives of his buildings' occupants.

The idea to craft spaces with clients' particular needs and wants in mind and to "create buildings and spaces with soul" evokes Howard Roark, the renunciant architect in Ayn Rand's "The Fountainhead." Granted, Briley operates with a greener conscience and possesses far superior social skills, but as a young architect he, like Roark, found himself dissatisfied with the status quo.

One night, Briley says, "I was whining and complaining to a friend about the fact that builders build what sells and buyers buy what's offered. No one was pushing the market." After listening to him rant for a while, Briley's friend finally said, "You sound just like this builder I know," and put Briley in touch with Josh Fedorka of Symphony Construction.

Briley and Fedorka quickly realized they shared not only similar perspectives and goals, but complementary vocations. Soon after meeting, they began working together with a realtor friend to create Harmony House, an energy efficient, environmentally friendly, single-family home which was built on spec, with no buyer in mind.

Completed in 2004, the house sold after only a week on the market, and Fedorka and Briley knew they had hit upon something. Buoyed by the success, Briley decided it was time for him to go out on his own, and thus Green Design Studio was born. Since then, Briley has been kept busy with new construction and expects his company to continue to grow as high prices at the gas pumps and increased awareness of pollution and global warming inspire a new wave of people to explore alternative energy options and sustainable practices.

As for Briley, he says that while he wasn't exactly an environmentally minded kid (who was in the '80s?), he quickly gravitated toward green design while in college. "Our whole class was particularly aware of it," he says, "which is kind of peculiar looking back on it." These days he believes everyone should be building green, or at least moving in that direction. After all, in addition to benefitting the environment and increasing personal wellness, employing alternative energy sources can also save consumers money.

Opus II, one of the houses Briley completed with Fedorka, features a geo-exchange system which provides heat to the house through ground source heat pumps, leaving the owners with only one utility bill to pay: electricity. Last year, that bill amounted to just over \$1,000 for the family of three who inhabit the 2,500-square-foot house, which was the first house in New England to receive Gold Certification from LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design).

Currently, Briley is at work on a 20-unit condo building in Bath which will use ground source heat pumps and feature a vegetated roof between two buildings. He also has plans to design an earth-shelter dwelling with a new client. His next flagship house with Fedorka, Aria, is off Tuttle Road in Falmouth. It uses evacuated tube solar collectors and boasts a solar hot water system.

To Briley's mind, the building world as a whole seems to be leaning green these days. Just three years ago, he says, he could call a company and ask, "What's the recycled content of your Sheetrock?" and be met with the equivalent of a blank stare at the other end of the line. "Now people will tell you how much of that recycled content is post-industrial and what percentage is post-consumer," he says. The jargon of sustainability, it would seem, is becoming more mainstream, and Briley is clearly pleased with the evolution.

"The day I get a brochure that states a product's embodied energy in a measurable quantity," he muses, "I'll rename the company, because then it will be passé."

To find out more about Green Design Studio, Harmony House or Chris Briley, visit Briley's website: www.architectureforlife.com.

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