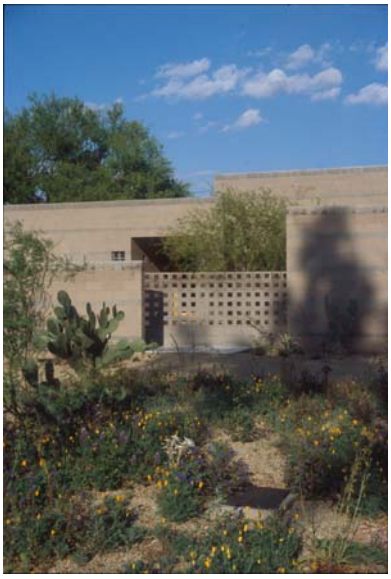
The Elusive "Green" House . . .



Western exposures that exclude solar heat gain, integrally colored concrete block made from local sand and gravel, and water conserving landscape are common sense strategies for responsible Sonoran desert living.

Finding authenticity in "Green Building" is like looking for the Holy Grail. True Knights of the Round Table never found it roaming the countryside, they found it looking within their own hearts. In 1969, I was in architecture school and a young "squire" of the Round Table immersed in this grand experiment of designing buildings in "new" and environmentally responsible ways: recycled materials, passive solar heat storage strategies, domestic hot water from the sun, and all the rest. Sound familiar?

Not long after the first Earth Day was celebrated in the spring of 1970, I was fortunate to land a part-time job with a landscape architect, and got a great environmental education alongside my formal college training. "Green" took on a whole new meaning again. Soon, right out of college I passed my exams for licensure in architecture and promptly signed up to take my exams in landscape architecture. In 1979, I started private practice--one of the few architect/landscape architect practitioners in Arizona.

And yes, I was looking for my own Holy Grail. I designed and built by myself [with a little help here and there….] an environmentally responsible home in Tempe that was small, sustainable, and partially earth integrated. Soon after, in 1981, I designed a totally underground office building that was built into the side of the Phoenix mountains with native vegetation planted on the roof. Later, I designed a house that was totally earth covered, and another using "Rastra", a recycled styrene and portland cement block system, both structures built by their owners in their spare time.... The legions of the Round Table were slowly growing, even back then….

So, after two decades of searching, here's one big principle forgotten along the way that I've learned roaming the countryside in search of the Holy Grail.....

Architecture that is sustainable isn't a conglomeration of the latest fad and fashion in the building industry. Just designing with Rastra or straw bale or the "gimmick de jour" doesn't make you "earth friendly"—it's how you use the sum total of all those resources! And for how long a period of time your choices yield positive results. Many European families have occupied the same well built home utilizing smart conventional construction for more than 300 years, passing it along to each generation instead of remodeling it or tearing it down every 60 years or so in order to build the latest thing. With all the wonderful new choices, let's not forget the "Sustainability of Simplicity".

Creativity within a Context: simple and straightforward construction of integrally colored masonry walls and ventilated glass openings was economical to construct while affording expansive views and indoor outdoor relationships.

I've seen so-called 'green' buildings with poor site planning and lacking solar orientations, large areas of glass facing the west sun, no natural ventilation, and miles of nylon wall to wall carpeting doomed to hit the landfill in 5 or 7 years time. Some straw bale construction is so heavily plastered inside and out, the combined thickness is equal to a six inch poured in place concrete wall! And if you are shipping 'green' products from Oregon and Canada, you've missed out on supporting local materials and traditions while adding pollution, noise, and fuel consumption over long distances to the equation.

Earth friendly wall construction is great, but when you've also filled the wall with miles of electrical wiring and dozens of high-tech lighting and security gizmos, puh-leeze, don't tell me you're saving energy and materials. To really wow me, you have to, "Show me the money!" That is, show me your total monthly energy bill. So many "green buildings" fail this monthly report card big time. And, let's take an honest look at how much waste and landfill you've created along the way....

Small that Feels Big: While measuring only 2,200 sqft liveable space with a 400 sqft woodshop and storage area, this house feels large because of outdoor patios and exterior living spaces.

I recently designed a no-nonsense house for two mathematics professors that doesn't utilize any of the gee-whiz parlor tricks--no new fangled materials for magazine editors to tout--just hard-headed common sense in design and execution. Limited use of forest products, no western facing glass save for a few glass blocks, small in size but large in feeling, and no garage! The outdoors comes in and inside reaches out making this small house feel big. No paint with attendant chemicals and solvents will be used on the exterior or interior masonry walls for decades and, if they pass the home along to their kids and grandkids, not repainted or remodeled for a century or two.

This simple, modest sized house has no wall to wall carpet to tear out and replace. No drywall ceilings to repaint. It has moderate sized rooms that welcome the winter sun, but limit the summer sun. Spaces that are easy to ventilate when the spring and autumn breezes pick up. And landscape design that is water conserving and that shelters a patio and east facing great window.

Is this the perfect house? No.... I'm still working on that. But rethinking our choices and patterns of living can yield a worthwhile perspective—keeping it simple. Let's keep looking hard inside the heart of the matter, instead of seeking a quick panacea out there in the countryside. The Holy Grail awaits…..

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