

The new nature of design

story by AMY L. STOCK photo by ERICA MILLER

Mention the words “green building” in Saratoga, and most people will direct you to Mike Phinney, architect and owner of Phinney Design Group, a leading architecture, interior design and green building consulting firm in Saratoga Springs.

Started in 2003 with a staff of two, Phinney now has 13 employees working on projects ranging from custom-built homes to commercial sites such as the new Lake George Firehouse and urban retrofits like the conversion of the old Harmony Mills in Cohoes to 120 apartments.

Phinney’s interest in green building reaches back to his youth, during which he spent a lot of time outdoors in the Adirondacks. His strong connection to nature led him down his career path.

While in architecture school, as many were focused on designing buildings as sculpture, Phinney says he was more interested in answering the question, “How does this building really relate to its environment?” He pursued this idea for his final thesis, focusing on environmental awareness and architecture. At the time, few were studying this idea, mostly in Germany.

Aware of Phinney’s interests, in 1997, the Albany-based firm Gregory J. Selaman hired Phinney as a project designer and architect to work on the new state Department of Environmental Conservation headquarters “green” building, the first in the state. For Phinney this was a “real learning experience,” as he was part of a team that also was evaluating the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) building rating system, still in draft form at the time.

This experience led Phinney to open his own architecture firm in Saratoga, quickly becoming known as a green building and design expert. His clientele reaches as far south as Pennsylvania and north to Canada. About 30 percent of their work is in the hotel, resort and hospitality area, where customers see huge energy savings, he says. Some of their resort projects include the recent expansions at the Sagamore Resort in Lake George and the Mohonk Mountain House in the Catskills.

His firm is just completing a LEED Gold Certified new home on Saratoga Lake that incorporates many of the key elements of green design: south-facing passive solar design, roof overhangs to shade the house in summer while allowing light in during winter, high performance foam and cellulose insulation, local wood materials and a geothermal well system in conjunction with a boiler for radiant heat.

On the commercial side, the new Lake George firehouse incorporates similar components, such as foam insulation, high efficiency boilers and a white roof. The roof reflects heat, and with the building’s big footprint, reduces the heat-island effect of the building, Phinney says.

“We cut the firehouse’s operating cost in half and increased the



size of the building by 30 percent,” he said.

According to Phinney, the environmental impact of saving a building is far greater than any new building. “Preservation is one of the greenest things you can do,” he said.

Phinney Design is working on the conversion of the former Victory Mills into upscale apartments and the redevelopment of the former Ellsworth Ice Cream facility on Division Street in Saratoga Springs into commercial and residential spaces, for which he is partnering with Alec Stephens of SAS Builders.

For more information on Phinney Design Group, go to www.phinneydesign.com. 