

The House That Dick & Jane Built



The site provides passive solar southern exposure for the length of the house and most of the main rooms.

Care and respect—for those who built their home and for the land it sits on—are the secret ingredients these homeowners brought to their magical home.

Richard and Jane Leifer's home in Saratoga Springs, New York, is a far cry from the fictitious, idealized house that the learn-to-read characters Dick and Jane grew up in. Yet very basic principles of careful planning, self-educating, and co-creating with their architect and builder could serve as a primer for anyone interested in sustainable building.

Jane is chemically sensitive, so when the Leifers began the journey to create a house that reflected their values, they were concerned about compromising her health. In 2002, their children were grown, and the couple was ready to move to the country and breathe clean air—inside their home and out. They're no strangers to research: Richard is a professor in the Lally School of Management and Technology at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, and Jane is working toward her doctorate of ministry from Drew University and is fundraising coordinator for the Foundation for Global Harmony (a group that educates Cambodian orphans in sustainable living and farming practices). Their inquiries into builders and designers who shared their belief in sustainable building led them to contractor Franklin Laskey of Capital Construction, who recommended LEED-accredited architect Michael Phinney, principal of Phinney Design Group.



The entry hall reflects the Leifers' graceful combination of Asian decor and Arts and Crafts-style architecture.

ARTICLE AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY LAURIE E. DICKSON

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We wanted a home built out of our love for each other,
and we let that expand into
every aspect of the project.”

Draped Indian fabrics and
silk pillows add warmth and
calm to the elegant look of
the master bedroom.

A CONVERSATION WITH THE HOMEOWNERS

What do you love most about this house?

JANE: The sense of openness combined with the cozy spaces. I also love all the natural materials and sustainably harvested wood that we used.

RICHARD: The radiant in-floor heating—especially on cold winter days.

What's your favorite room?

RICHARD: The living room is a comfortable sitting area with views of the outdoors. It's a great place to curl up in the sun with a book.

JANE: I love the bedroom because it leads you to the western sky. It's a comforting space where you can let your spirit soar into the sunset.

What would you do differently?

RICHARD: I'd eliminate the porch outside Jane's office. We don't seem to use that space as much as the other porches.

JANE: The only thing I would change is to put a bigger window in my office.

What advice can you offer new home builders?

RICHARD: You have to ask for green alternatives because most builders aren't that familiar with sustainable choices. Do your homework or bring in a green builder, architect, or consultant. New sustainable systems and materials are developed all the time, so pay attention to those changes.

JANE: An important concept for any type of construction is that we're not the only ones who will live here. You need to build something that's good for your children, grandchildren, and also for the planet. Think about the people who will live in your home 200 years from now. I'm so grateful that I was part of a creation that extends beyond me. This is our small contribution to a better world, and it feels good.



ABOVE: Each of the home's decks provide outdoor living that can be enjoyed at any time of day.

BELOW: The master bedroom is Jane's favorite room. "It's the final destination in the house," she says. "It faces the western sky. There's a sense of comforting space and a sense of being able to let your spirit soar into the sunset."





ADVICE FROM THE HOMEOWNERS

- Use the Internet for resources, research, and finding sustainable materials.
- Spend time on the planning stage; it will save you money in the long run.
- Always put the house first, not your ego. Resolve not to argue.
- Appreciate the architect and builder's professional knowledge.
- Use a line-item budget so you can decide what to cut and what to keep while staying within budget.
- Build with love.



ABOVE: The warm kitchen reflects the principles of a house built with love.

RIGHT: The master bathroom uses a simple color palette to create inviting and serene space.



The sunny living room is a favorite place in the house. "I could sit in the loveseat in the window alcove all day," architect Phinney says.

WHAT MAKES THIS HOME GREEN?

- Bamboo and cork floors
- Locally grown and milled wood
- Sustainably harvested fir, hemlock, and birch
- Non-formaldehyde sheet plywood
- Zero- and low-VOC finishes
- High-efficiency heat system and heat-recovery ventilation system
- In-floor radiant heat
- Blown-in, recycled-wood cellulose insulation
- Finger-jointed preprimed cedar siding (recycled)
- MiraTec composite exterior trim board material
- Siting to take advantage of passive solar and cooling
- All native plants and rocks from the building site

Basement



Illustration by Gayle Ford

First Floor



Second Floor





FAR LEFT: The house nestles into the wooded hill and is only visible as visitors make their way down a stony path. The Leifers didn't want to see or hear the road, so they sited the home below the street. Siding made from cedar shake and Maritek, a recycled wood composite, form the exterior facade. NEAR LEFT: The stairs are built using four different woods, including mahogany, locally grown and milled fir for newels, and local poplar and birch.

The Leifers wanted a stylistic combination of Arts and Crafts, Frank Lloyd Wright, and a hint of Asian aesthetics—not quite the legacy of the fictitious Dick and Jane. Richard created the 2,500-square-foot home's budget and floor plan, working with 3-D computer programs to visualize each of the rooms and window placements—then he worked with Phinney to perfect it. After five months of brainstorming with Phinney—who brought the Leifers' ideas to life and added some magic of his own—they started building and agreed that no more major changes would occur. They believe this was a key to saving money during construction. And within nine months they had their new home.

Fun in nature

For Phinney, the project was a dream come true. He'd been working for a large architectural firm and had just finished as head designer for the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation Building in Albany, the state's first LEED-certified building. Meeting with the Leifers convinced him to start his own design firm, focusing on green building technologies. "Richard and Jane had a body of knowledge and understanding of sustainable principles beyond most homebuilders," he says.

Since then, Phinney Design Group has completed four green homes and has more on the boards. The firm utilizes a holistic approach responsive to each project's unique set of requirements. "We don't start the design until thoroughly understanding the natural site features," Phinney explains. "Topography, light, wind, and location of significant land features such as mature trees and rock outcroppings guide the initial design template. We strive to make each project distinct; the firm doesn't have a signature style because design is shaped by many different influences, including context, budget, and schedule."

This was particularly successful in the Leifers' home. "What I like most is the fact we hardly disturbed the natural site's features or topography," Phinney says. "The house is tucked into the hill and appears to grow from the landscape." Winding stairs and rock walls lead visitors down the wooded hillside to the house, whose exterior colors in soft forest hues blend with the surrounding environment. "Nature is happy the house is here," Jane declares.

We talk and listen

Jane and Richard believe their home succeeded because of the mutual respect between the builder, architect, and themselves. Phinney had the vision and attention to detail that captured what the Leifers were aiming for, and Laskey gladly pursued their ideal of using local, nontoxic materials and sustainably harvested lumber.

This respect extended to the couple's relations as well. They agreed always to discuss choices, and if they came to an impasse they turned to Phinney or Laskey for their answer. "We agreed to always put what was best for the house first, not our egos," Jane says.

Laskey, who was relatively new to green building technologies, respected Phinney's work in that area and was eager to integrate green practices into his building. Today, his company is one of the few in the Northeast registered with the American Lung Association as a healthy homebuilder.

"One of the challenges is to design something that offers what the client wants aesthetically and that's still energy efficient and uses sustainable materials," Laskey says. "It's important to think about the big picture; you're building a home for present and future generations. Durability, low maintenance, and creating a healthy living environment should be considered in a formula for sustainability. You want materials to last and not end up in landfills."

Laskey is particularly interested in the heat-recovery ventilation (HRV) system, which filters dust and allergens and tempers the fresh air from the outside. "HRV filtration systems run on the equivalent of a seventy-five-watt bulb and take air from inside out while bringing outside air in," he says.

In addition to maintaining clean air (to accommodate Jane's chemical sensitivities) by eschewing toxic glues, paints, finishes, and formaldehyde-containing wood, the home is energy efficient. "A unique feature is the thermal chimney and the cross-ventilation techniques we employed," Phinney says. "We designed holes in the floor of the master bedroom area that could be opened to allow the heat from solar gain in the sunspace below to transfer into the upper bedroom areas. Combined with centrally placed stairs that open up above to north-facing clerestory windows, the whole system operates passively."

We build with love

Now that the home is complete, Jane and Richard not only enjoy it themselves but also bask in the admiration of guests. "When people come to the house they notice how it feels, not just the features," Jane says.

Her best advice for achieving this kind of success? "Be sure you build in a way that reflects your highest values. We've heard too many house-building stories where there was miscommunication, frustration, anger, power games, and dishonesty. We wanted a home built out of our love for each other, and we let that expand into every aspect of the project. The process of how a couple, architect, builder, and crew interact and care about what they're doing can be seen and felt in very real ways within the house." 🏡