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March 2009: You, me and green

A Woolen Mills house brings it all together



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0:00 a.m. Mar. 3, 2009

What it comes down to is marriage.

That includes the kind with rings and honeymoons. When Sara Dexter and Koli Cutler exchanged vows last May, the newlyweds chose to nix the limo and reception hall, instead leading their wedding party on an exuberant march from the steps of the Woolen Mills chapel down the road to their home. There, they had thrown open the doors of the bottom floor towards the River's Edge common garden, where they held the reception on that long strip of open grass, lit by chandeliers and starlight.

Angled 15 degrees off true south, the front façade of Sara Dexter and Koli Cutler's house avoids sun from the west while optimizing southern exposure. Deliberate positioning plus low-E glazing on the windows, designed to moderate heat and

light flow into the house, make for a heat-efficient, solar savvy design.

“That’s why we bought the house,” Dexter jokes. Who could blame them? It’s easy to get caught up in the romance of the idea: bringing together the people you love under a roof that you love, all in one rollicking celebration. Their home, a lean, gray, three-floor structure, more skyscraper than picket-fenced cottage, is itself a union of sorts: the intersection of Dexter and Cutler’s lives as their first home together, but also the meeting place of form and function—the practical needs and realities of everyday life blended with modern eco-friendly innovations.

Many see green building as an exercise in restraint, yet Dexter and Cutler’s home, designed by Allison Ewing of Hays+Ewing Design Studio, addresses the “For me, or for Earth?” question by asking, Why not both? Throughout the house, there are touches of both conscious green economies and of personalization; there is no sense of sacrifice or thrift. Sitting at the crossroads of green building and everyday living, within a mixed neighborhood of architecture both notable and humble, the house boasts a design that marries beauty, function, and sustainability.

River’s reclamation

Born in the spirit of preservation, the River’s Edge project, encompassing 10 lots and a central green space along the Rivanna River, is the baby of the Rivanna Collaborative, a design team including Ewing, her husband Chris Hays, and three other partners (see box, page 21). When they noticed the prime location of the plot, they quickly plucked up the land for safekeeping. “We worried that someone would do something we wouldn’t like there,” says Ewing, conjuring a fear of vinyl-sided townhomes on this site

across the street from her own home. “So we became our own developers.”

Blue stove, tailored cabinets, and a tiled backsplash that refracts and dazzles: custom kitchen details make cooking comfortable and personal.

Location also attracted Dexter and Cutler to River’s Edge. Buying the house in its skeletal stage, the couple was knee-deep in the last months of both construction and engagement, looking for ways to fit their lives—and accumulated stuff—together. It had been a stroke of luck that brought Dexter to River’s Edge. “One day I was running past the community and I looked up at the [River’s Edge] sign,” she says. With its proximity to Downtown and modern design, the spot had definite appeal. “I thought, why not give it a shot?”

Originally considering the lot next door, Dexter had her doubts when shown the house that would ultimately become home. “I saw the house and thought, O.K., that’s tall and kind of odd looking,” she says. However, after she was through the front door, she quickly

changed her mind. “Once you’re inside, you get what it’s all about,” she says with obvious affection.



It’s true—as strange as the house appears from a distance, looking out from the raised first floor, you can see from horizon to horizon. There’s a treehouse feeling here, speaking of a playfulness and creativity in design while simultaneously serving a practical purpose: to raise the house off the flood plain, per building specifications. Despite its modest 2,000-square-foot floor plan, the house feels spacious—more than that, Dexter says, it feels comfortable.

Inside looking out

Nine-foot ceilings and a long, open plan capped by windows open up the first floor to light and movement.

Comfort was one of the main qualities the developers wanted to bring to life inside this house—without sacrificing greenness, and with an eye on the bigger picture. Ewing focused on community-level design, thinking “in terms of the physical and emotional well-being of homeowners” and using low-emissions building materials and practices. Beyond that, the Rivanna Collaborative also sought “to explore sustainability on a larger scale”—in, for example, Ewing and Hays’ arrangement of community spaces that promote meeting and mingling. The group was looking not only to nurture the earth—including this sensitive riparian site—but to create spaces that encourage homeowners to look outward.

Though the shared garden is right now the only visible evidence of this plan, community feeling also manifests itself in the planning of each home. Walking along the first floor, Cutler points out that each window frames trees; one was designed with a desk in mind, while another sits, like a painted landscape, on a dining room shelf. Running floor to ceiling and bookending both the north and south faces of the house, first-floor windows allow for a long sightline that expands the space beyond its square footage.

For Dexter, this conscious placement of glass has brought the community inside—especially regular users of Riverview Park, some of whom wave as they run past.

Tight ship

Beyond this friendly aesthetic, the home’s green aspects create comfort as well as savings. Take the windows: Their arrangement, along with the angling of the house, deliberately maximizes

thermal efficiency, capturing sunlight in the winter but avoiding direct exposure in high summer. Using solar orientation, and innovative building practices like spray foam insulation and structurally insulated panels (SIPs)—Ewing and Hays' design sought to tighten the house's "thermal envelope" and prevent costly heat leakage for more efficient temperature control—an estimated 40 percent cost reduction.

"We were interested in a modernism that grow out of an approach to sustainability," says Ewing. "If there's something there, there should be a reason for it."

For Dexter and Cutler, who weren't green enthusiasts from the start, these innovations translate to reassurance in a time of increasingly tight wallets. "Overall, the energy efficiency feels directly related with comfort," Dexter says. "My hands and feet are always cold, so I love feeling comfortable turning up the temperature." Other innovations include a rain chain and barrel for water savings as well as solar panels and an angled pop-out to accommodate the stairs.

While these design quirks translate to a number of different savings—water, cash, and space—they also speak to the opportunities that have recently become available to owners within the realm of green design and customization. Green-minded buyers have more than a handful of options in the current market, and many of them don't mean living like an eco-minded monk or doling out enormous sums of cash.

For Dexter and Cutler, this version of green living includes waking up to leafy views on summer mornings, deck-top barbecues, and finding room between windows for their favorite paintings—it has become such a part of the fabric of their lives that it is inseparable from the house's other aspects and their own story. As such, the house is more than a sum of its green efficiencies, but a place of meaningful overlap—a shared space for family and community, for interiors and exteriors—a place for tying knots.—*Lucy Zhou*

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