

Build Green, Be Happy!

by Elizabeth DiSalvo

Happiness. This is what some may call the touchy-feely reason to build green. I get it. I have friends who need a lot of convincing; they just want to know the bottom line and want to talk only about the facts. How can I even bring something as ephemeral and vague as happiness into the equation?

To me, happiness is perhaps the most important reason to design and build a green home. I think you should love your house. Where do you spend more time than your house? (OK, for some it's the office, but many of us have little control over that.) Your house should be your happy place. I believe you should walk into your home and sigh a relieved, 'I'm home.' And then I think you should move about your house always looking at vistas of beauty that make you pause and feel anything from a deep sense of calm contentment to joyful glee.

Good design can make people happy. Regardless of project finances, space can be well thought out, purposeful and also beautiful. There are so many opportunities: a fun open space for gathering, a cozy quiet nook for reading, a table near a window for drinking coffee as the sun rises, a subdued study for working, a spa-like shower that never makes you bang your elbows, a big clear kitchen island for making a good mess.

Don't worry, be happy

But doesn't all architecture have the possibility of creating happiness — not just green architecture? Yes and no. To me there are three kinds of homes:

- The un-designed. These are usually built without real design guidance and have the one goal of getting something acceptable built that will sell and make money.
- The luxuriously designed. Here I am talking about spaces that are usually inhabited by the very wealthy. Homes that were built not only with the exuberant guidance of an architect but also an interior designer, a lighting designer, a kitchen designer, a color specialist, etc.



A fun, cozy and light-filled kitchen makes the owners of this home, a Scarsdale family, very happy. — Trillium Architects Photo

Beautiful, but expensive and often spatially daunting. Think ballroom-sized living rooms and other rooms that are never used.

- The well-designed home. Homes that create beautifully designed spaces, scaled for living, that work seamlessly with both the practical needs of the inhabitants and the surrounding natural environment, while simultaneously creating the experiences of inspiration and beauty.

Green architecture holds number three as one of its primary tenets.

If you want to talk about "how" in practical terms, try this: Houses that are loved are cared for better. Things that are cared for last longer. The greenest thing you can do with a house is to make it last for a few hundred years; don't tear it down. Cheap houses fall apart and get replaced. Plus, the act of actively caring for something has been proven to be one of the primary things that creates

human happiness.

Home sweet home

Luckily, the same things that make a house work better also make people feel better. Here are more ways that building green enhances happiness:

- Lots of natural light cuts down on electrical costs and enhances human happiness. Our bodies change chemically depending on seasons, time of day, and the amount of light. People are happiest when their bodies are in tune with nature. Most people may not think of this, but almost every person — when asked — will cite lots of natural light as the number one factor in loving their house.
- Overhangs cut down on overheating of the home and protect walls from water damage but they also provide cool, glare-free interior space.
- Thick, well-insulated walls save money in heating and cooling. They also result in smaller temperature fluctuations and a quieter home. The heating and cooling systems aren't kicking on and off all of the time. There is less room temperature variation, leading to less occupant grumbling.
- Smaller, specifically designed homes reduce occupant stress, organize clutter, enhance family togetherness and meaningful solitude, and save time and money in all sorts of ways.

Humans are drawn toward good design. We yearn for natural light and we appreciate proportion. As architect Louis Sullivan said, "Form follows function." If a house is consciously designed for human use and happiness, as well as integration with its natural environment, then that is the form it will take. All the parts will harmonize to create a wonderful living environment. Shouldn't everyone love their house?

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