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Renovation keeps aged Converse bungalow on a green path

By JAN SCALISI, For the Herald-Journal

Renovating older homes in Converse Heights is nothing new, but a 1920s bungalow has undergone such a transformation that it might be called reborn.

The home at 774 Rutledge St. has been turned into a "green" house, renovated to certifiable standards according EarthCraft House, a voluntary green-building program for residential development and renovation that originated in Atlanta.

"We wanted to renovate a house and make money, but the real motive for this project was to educate contractors, Realtors and the general public about green green building," explains Jason Head of JL Design Builders & Renovations Inc., the general contractor for the project that is the first of its kind in Spartanburg County.

"We wanted to show that you can do a luxurious green house."

In fact, Head and his partners at Z-ecospaces - Realtor Nancy Riehle of Green Growth Team at Keller Williams Realty, interior designer Beth Harley of H2R Interiors and Head's partner Litia Wellmon - chose to invest in the bungalow home because its design had elements that were already eco-friendly.

Their redesign, for example, kept the high ceilings and window locations that were already in place to take advantage of cross-ventilation, and added transom windows atop the replacement casement windows to bring in more natural light.

Throughout the renovations, the Z-ecospaces partners said they looked for ways to create a healthy indoor living environment, to save energy, and to impact the environment as little as possible. They used construction techniques and products that will lead to long-term utility savings, they said.

Although green buildings can be more expensive to construct - estimates run from 10 percent to 30 percent - home-owners start saving money the first month they move in, according to Angela Vining, executive director of Upstate Forever's Spartanburg office, and a variety of tax incentives are in place for green building.

In fact, it was Vining who pointed the partners toward the EarthCraft program. They attended training in Atlanta last December.

"We realized that 90 percent of what they ask you to do, we're doing already because it's a no-cost, smarter way of building," Head said. Techniques such as using wooden blocks to take the place of extra studs at wall intersections during the framing of a house save money and materials and allow space for insulation; cutting smaller holes for pipes and then caulking them lowers energy costs.

EarthCraft standards guided many of the decisions made during the renovation. The home expanded from two bedrooms and one bath, to four bedrooms, three full baths and two half-baths, and doubled in square footage without increasing its footprint - a feat Z-ecospaces managed by digging and finishing a new lower level.

To save energy costs, the home is insulated so tightly that filtered fresh air must be piped in to air-condition and heat; even the dryer uses outside air, preserving the already air-conditioned or heated air inside the home. The tight envelope allows for smaller heating and air conditioning units.

Traditional and trendy

Design decisions dovetailed with healthy and environmentally friendly decisions in the choice of paint, flooring and carpet. Low-volatile organic compound emission paint and lacquer were used, and the home's upper-level floors are bamboo hardwood, an easily replenished resource. The carpet downstairs is easily laid in squares and requires no extra adhesive - and the squares can be pulled up and recycled.

"We stayed with a Mission style in keeping with the time period of the house, but then we added some trendy touches," Harley said.

Flat-panel kitchen cabinets with little ornamentation, bead-board wainscotting and bead-board style doors represent the clean Mission style. But concrete countertops in the kitchen and bathrooms are a modern and environmentally friendly touch because the countertops, made from recycled materials, require less energy and lower temperatures in the manufacturing process.

All of the stainless steel appliances are Energy Star-qualified. A variety of specialty ceilings were incorporated, including a triple-trey ceiling in the master bedroom, a barrel ceiling over the Jacuzzi, and a vaulted ceiling in the kitchen.

The exterior was carefully planned as well.

"We added more than a thousand square feet of deck to encourage the residents to enjoy the outdoors," Wellmon said. The two-story deck includes wiring for an outdoor kitchen. The house was sided with Hardi Board, a cement fiberboard that's impervious to water damage, termites and rot. And to combat the flooding sometimes found in Converse Heights, a commercial-grade sump pump was installed.

"I think there's a great demand for quality and for green building in Spartanburg," Riehle said. "Doing a green renovation is the ultimate in green, because building new houses takes more energy and material and is more disturbing to the environment. We're delighted to show how a green renovation can be done in a historic neighborhood such as Converse Heights."

Freelance writer Jan Scalisi resides in Spartanburg.

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