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Reduce, reuse, recycle, remodel - Couple turn their 30-year-old house into model home for green movement

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It all started, Boo Blakey said, because she wanted a real laundry room instead of just a washer and dryer in the kitchen.

The results, months later: the house in the Stonewall neighborhood near Clays Mill Road that is one of the most environmentally friendly remodeling jobs in Kentucky.

With rising global environmental concerns and predictions of higher energy costs even in cheap electricity states like Kentucky, the 30-year-old, 3,400-square-foot house is likely to represent the wave of the future.

Most walls were taken down to the studs, which allowed a high-tech foam insulation and air barrier system to be installed. Replacement windows were much more energy efficient than the originals.

The two-story house had two heating and air conditioning units, but now is so efficient that one has been turned off, said Millard Blakey, Boo's husband.

The Blakeys own a remodeling company called Wreck Creations, but the Stonewall house is their residence.

Millard Blakey estimated that he spent 25 percent to 35 percent more for the green aspects of the remodeling job. But that includes a couple of very expensive items that most people probably wouldn't add - a photovoltaic system that generates a little electricity and another system that uses the sun to heat water.

The average green home costs less than 5 percent more than a conventional home after tax credits are figured in, and pays for itself in five to 10 years, said Bill Hodges of Green Build Kentucky, a program sponsored by the Home Builders Association of Kentucky.

The voluntary program incorporates the green guidelines of the National Association of Home Builders and the federal Environmental Protection Agency's Energy Star standards for windows, insulation and heating and cooling duct work.

The Blakeys' house last week became the second house in Kentucky, and the first remodeled house, to earn a Green Build Kentucky certificate.

It also earned an Energy Star certificate.

There are about 2,000 Energy Star houses in Kentucky, but this is the first remodeling job to get a certificate, said John Davies, acting director of the state Division of Energy Efficiency and Conservation.

Mayor Jim Newberry, who was on hand, said he hopes that green construction quickly becomes the standard for his city, which has been tagged as having the largest per capita carbon footprint in the nation.

"I think once the public learns about the benefits associated with this kind of building, we'll see it spread all over the community," Newberry said.

To qualify as "green," the Blakey house also earned points for the use of various recycled or environmentally friendly products.

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The floors, for example, are made of recycled fencing from horse farms. Some of the counter tops were made of recycled aluminum (which looks remarkably like granite and costs about the same) and some are made with recycled beer bottles.

The interior paint was low in VOCs, or volatile organic compounds, which means it is healthier.

"Sometimes our customers aren't interested in being green, but in the interview they let us know that they have allergies," Millard Blakey said. "This paint doesn't stink; it doesn't give you headaches."

The carpets are made from recycled material, and are themselves recyclable.

Outside the house, the cement siding and the concrete driveway and sidewalk contain fly ash, which is a byproduct of burning coal.

The drywall inside contains synthetic gypsum, another coal byproduct.

"It's a neat way to be friendly to the environment and friendly to coal," Millard Blakey said. "We are a coal-producing state."

Below a gutter at the front entrance is a fountain that catches water from the roof, which can in turn be used to water the lawn.

In back is underground storage that can hold 3,000 gallons of rainwater - giving the same benefit as a giant, out-of-sight rain barrel.

Although the Blakeys crammed about every green idea they could think of into the remodeling job, they stressed that there are many levels now available for people who want to pick and choose.

And Jeff Hohman, manager of member services for East Kentucky Power, said the easiest, least expensive thing anyone can do is seal air leaks in a house and ask their energy supplier for a free audit to see what else needs to be done.

When looking for a new house, he said, an Energy Star rating should be used as a guide, just as people use a miles-per-gallon sticker on a car.

"I hope people start paying as much attention to buying a house as they do buying a car," he said. "They will buy a Prius, then spend a quarter-million dollars on a house that leaks like a sieve."

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to learn more

To learn more about energy-efficient houses and how to check your own house for air leaks, go to www.energy.ky.gov.

To find out more about the Blakeys' remodeling job, go to www.wreckcreations.biz/greenremodel.htm.

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