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# OregonArchitect

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## AIA, *Dwell* magazine recognize Portland designer for sustainable renovation techniques

*Remodel of 1925 bungalow showcases principles that reduce energy consumption*

**W**HEN THE AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF ARCHITECTS AND *DWELL* MAGAZINE CHALLENGED designers nationwide to walk the walk with the "How Green Are You?" contest, Portland's Ryan Walsh answered back with a residential renovation that garnered the grand prize.

Walsh, owner of drw design build, renovated a 1925 bungalow in Southeast Portland over the course of eight years. Financial constraints led Walsh and his wife, Holly, to explore some creative techniques. The house became a collection of various green projects, each utilizing recycled materials.

Walsh spoke with *Oregon Architect* about the challenges and rewards of the bungalow renovation, how working in construction for several years enhances his design process, and his vision for drw design build. His responses have been edited for clarity and brevity.

*Q: Why did you decide to undertake such a major renovation?*

A: I was looking for a project that would allow me to set some roots for a while, and I also wanted a project in which I could explore architecture and its meaning to me. Work at the time was satisfying because I was learning how to become an architect and how to work with clients to achieve their goals. Purchasing the house was about exploring the architectural world in a far less restrained degree. I had no interest in historically restoring a bungalow because that was not what I learned in school. The University of Oregon taught me to interpret, question,

and design artful solutions to problems. This was a project that would allow me to do just that on my own terms.

The house had been poorly remodeled several times and all the original craftsman type elements were gone. I did a quick sketch plan to see if I could remodel it in an interesting way before committing to it, and it was clear that it had great potential.

*Q: Financial restraints led to the length of the project and the alternative design approach. Please describe what that approach involved, and what were some of the most significant lessons you learned?*

A: Purchasing a house two years out of school was a challenge. I was able to squeak by, but had no extra income to spend on remodeling. I worked nights and weekends, without a schedule. This was really important because I did not put any unnecessary restrictions on myself. When I needed a break or time to figure something out, I took this time. It was a big experiment. I moved walls, tried many different ideas, and changed things as I learned.

Most importantly, I learned a new way of designing and thinking about materials. While working with Green Gables I was very involved in construction, and constantly on job sites, seeing different processes, and collecting leftover materials. I collected pieces of wood and other materials that were too small or not good enough and stored everything in the backyard. As the house progressed, I would go

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**AIA AWARD** *continued from the front cover*

to the backyard to see which collection of material was big enough to complete the certain project I was trying to complete. I would then try to figure out how I could use the material in an interesting way, yet still satisfy the utilitarian need.

In this way, the materials drove the design. I learned that by dropping my conditioned desire for something to look a certain way and opening myself up to a larger group of possibilities, I could create a new aesthetic with material I had.



**Q: What are some of the other green elements you included in the project?**

A: The house is “green,” but primarily in a low-tech sense. I purchased it because it was originally placed on the north side of the site. It was also long and thin in the east/west direction. Reorienting the interior of the house and changing the rooms to better take advantage of the sun allowed simple passive heating and cooling to take place.

- ◆ The entire framing package for the shop garage was recycled from a building I had dismantled. I selected the best two-by-sixes for trim and the remaining material was straight and dry.
- ◆ All the windows and doors in the addition are made from recycled fir doors from a local dismantled church.
- ◆ The windows in the main house are defect sashes from a Eugene window manufacturer that I purchased and made jams for using recycled wood and glazed myself.
- ◆ On the exterior of the master addition is a rain screen made from a collection of old studs. Once de-nailed, ripped, and planed, the studs revealed beautiful material. Lap siding on the main house is from a remodel. I was able to flip and reuse the siding, exposing the back side.
- ◆ Kitchen cabinets were made of short scraps collected from three decks.
- ◆ Leftover cabinet doors became a geometrical wall treatment, and cut-offs from structural plywood and interior trim created a closet wall that is art itself.
- ◆ I purchased a unit of closet rods rejected because of structural or visual defects to build fences around the property, and ended up using the leftover rods throughout the house.
- ◆ Large operable doors on the east and west sides of the house provide cross-ventilation, and an operable window in the loft draws and exhausts hot air.
- ◆ Most of the trim throughout the house is made from 75-year-old structural two-by-sixes and two-by-

fours that came from a house I was working on at the time.

- ◆ Much of the wood has nail holes or oxidation from nails in some form.
- ◆ On the master bedroom/bathroom addition to the east of the main house, a four-inch concrete slab is the finished floor surface and contains in-floor radiant heat. Two six-foot-by-eight-foot glass doors bring in natural light from the south, and high transom windows bring in daylight from the north and east. The high summer sun does not hit the glass directly, and in the winter the slab soaks up the natural heat from the low sun. Because of the generous overhangs, the slab stays cool all summer and this room is by far the coolest room in the house.

**Q: How did it feel to win the national AIA award? What kind of response have you received since then, and how has the award impacted your work?**

A: It is a real honor to have received the award, especially because the process and the low-tech nature of the house were acknowledged. When the project began, it was really about me exploring. My financial restriction created the environment in which I needed to work. These conditions gave rise to a totally new process that is inherently green and inexpensive. This was tremendously interesting for me as a designer, and to receive an award for it helps me believe I can do more like-minded projects on a professional level.

The public response has been strong because many people appreciate how the project was inexpensive and involved recycled materials. Until economies of scale start to change the cost of more environmental-based products, it is hard for the average homeowner to allocate funds for photovoltaic panels, solar water heating, and even recycled and low-chemical products. This house was built using standard materials and lots of time and energy. The design process and my architectural education were keys to its success. Ultimately, I wish all my days were focused on this type of work, as it is by far the most rewarding to date.

**Q: How did working construction to pay for college enhance your design process?**

A: Working construction throughout college and from 2000 with Green Gables has afforded me the great fortune of understanding how things get put together. This understanding helped me develop a tremendous appreciation for craftspeople and since I understand the fundamentals of building, fellow builders can appreciate my ideas. A professor at U of O used to give me a hard time about my construction work because he believed I was limiting myself to design in a manner that is realistically buildable, rather than pushing the limits of architecture and allowing the construction process to take care of itself. Though I respected his challenges, I believe understanding construction can inspire the design process. To me, this understanding is a design tool itself.

**Q: What were some of the most profound lessons to come from your internship with Hans Kretschmer and Green Gables Design and Restoration?**

A: Hans Kretschmer is one of the most creative and talented architects in Portland. He is also relentlessly precise and thorough because of his own training as a carpenter and architect. Very early in



my internship with him, he explained how important detail was on our drawings. People were going to build what I was drawing. If I drew it incorrectly, it would get built incorrectly and I would be responsible for it. The sooner I learned to be precise and understand the construction process, the less liability I would have, and the better the product would be. It has been a privilege to work with Hans and Lindley Morton at Green Gables because of their extensive experience in the design-build field, their attention to detail, and the tremendous tradespeople and clients with whom they work.

**Q: What are your goals for drw design build? Can you give us a sense of the firm's market – both in terms of project type and geography?**

A: drw design build is a new venture whose aim is to produce smaller, commercial and residential buildings with a high level of creative detail, and that capitalize on Oregon's mild climate in ways that reduce the barriers between indoors and out. I hope to stretch the public's aesthetic and spatial sense by using (or ideally reusing) local materials and products in unexpected, artful ways. It's like slow food, but with architecture.

**Q: What motivated you to become an architect?**

A: I was motivated to become an architect because I believed it to be a profession in which I could be creative while continuing to learn. Architecture is also such a tangible, real business. We produce something that has a powerful effect on the lives of people.

**Q: Much attention is being placed on green design and construction. Where are the greatest opportunities to advance the state of the art?**

A: I believe the biggest advances to be made will come in the form of educating the public to look beyond our conditioned world and the images it produces. It is our charge as designers to elevate the built environment in ways that respect the resources we have as well as the contexts in which we live. We are also challenged to reach beyond emulating languages of previous centuries. Commercially, we have made strides in these areas, but incredible opportunities still exist as we develop residential space. The more the built environment is designed by architects, the more artful, resourceful and inspiring it will be. ■



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