



A Vision of Home

Bill Hutchins & Helicon Works

Standing in the middle of the house on Holly Avenue in Takoma Park and looking at the shells of what are slowly evolving into finished rooms, you get the sense that this will be an area that is truly alive. The elements of design, the materials, the way it flows, the consciousness of it all makes it easy to visualize the future – one of warmth, earthiness, connectedness, a spiritual space that breathes with meaning for its inhabitants.

People sometimes talk dispassionately about buildings — brick and mortar — dwelling of necessity and convenience, but nothing could be further from that here. This isn't just another "frame it, toss up the drywall" renovation. The work reflects the people who are creating it. They will no doubt spend years in this building that will become as much a part of the story, the mythology of their lives, as their lives themselves. It is becoming Home.

One of architect Bill Hutchins' clients described him as "...an architect midwife." The Rosetta stone to this somewhat puzzling concept is found in the way he works with his clients and the results. His projects span from Baja, Mexico to Asheville, North Carolina, to right here in the Washington, D.C. area. He helps each of his clients give birth to their personal, unique vision of Home. Hutchins and his company, Helicon Works, start at a place where traditional templates of architectural design, resulting in cookie cutter buildings, end. His work has intention — yours.

Now, here on Holly Avenue, this seasoned veteran of thoughtful, social and eco-conscious, architectural design and building turns his attention to another personal vision — his, and that of his family. He says, "If it's not beautiful there's no point." In this case the beauty is rugged, earthy, connected to the land — honoring and respectful of those resources he uses.

Hutchins is committed to a fusion of philosophical principles that are as much a part of his life as his work. They include minimal waste, the use of non-toxic materials, and

replenishable resources. Equally important is purposeful architectural design; a sense of the spiritual connection between people, the earth and nature, and pragmatic functionality of everyday living space. He likens his preferences for materials to his preferences for food, natural, not too processed.

Although Hutchins is quick to admit that there are no clear cut definitions and no unquestionable rights and wrongs, he draws distinctions between sustainable, green, natural and organic building. He asks, "If something green is brought in from California, is it still green?" He considers not only what he uses, but also from where it comes.

Organic building for Bill Hutchins involves among other things, using natural and local resources that are from this area when applicable, and fair trade whenever possible. Seemingly small decisions like supporting local independent vendors as opposed to large corporate, national chains are deliberate.

The Holly Avenue house itself is a historic, traditional bungalow. What is happening inside goes well beyond that. The walls start with framing, much of which is made out of salvaged, reused wood. Straw bales are used for insulation, which Hutchins says is a better insulator and "breathes," unlike conventional insulation. On top of the straw bales the walls are being sculpted with a lime and sand plaster-like mix downstairs, earthen plaster upstairs, to create walls of character. Although he has chosen a coarse, rugged earthy appearance for these walls, Hutchins points out that they could have been built to create a typical smooth walled appearance, but to him that misses the whole point. He wanted a look that conveyed a more sensual quality with corners and turns that gently curve in a soft roundedness that make them immediately intriguing and inviting.

Economic sense is at work here as well. Many of the materials are less expensive than standard ones. In addition to the reused wood framing, and the economical straw bales, Hutchins purchased excess or "orphan" windows. These perfectly good, brand new windows were not used for various reasons, and he bought them for one tenth of their list price.



In one bathroom, the shower walls will be done in a beautiful mosaic effect using various size pieces of broken and discarded Silestone®, naturally beautiful quartz.

Ecological concerns are of the utmost importance to Hutchins. He is heating his home using (dry shelled) corn instead of oil, and he is installing a solar panel to aid in the generation of electricity. The Historic Preservation Committee of Takoma Park has even given him permission to install solar panels that will be partially visible from the street. He talks about the damage

done in the production of conventional electricity as mountain tops are “blown off,” in the search for coal in the earth, which is then burned as part of the electricity production process. There will be a “living roof,” which will provide beauty and shade as a natural way to help keep the home cooler in summer.

Hutchins’ elements of design are in keeping with his overall consciousness. The upstairs will be a loft-like floor of bedrooms and bathrooms, evoking an urban sense. The upstairs back bedroom has a small cavernous space designed intentionally so that his daughters’ room will have a whimsical area for play. There are bay alcoves on both floors overlooking the back yard that can be used to provide seating in social settings or sleeping.

For Bill Hutchins, his philosophies are integrated in his life and work. Of the connection between the physical and the spirit he sees Home as “a deep place of refuge that gives us the strength to go out into the world and do our work.” As part of his work with Helicon Works, Hutchins gives workshops in subjects like Ecological Building & Living Practices, and Creating Home where participants explore the union between Home and its environment. People work with him to gain valuable, on-the-job training and experience in the skills required to do the kind of building he does. He says it is not difficult work that just about anyone can do. His life and work prove that there is a better way to build that is non-toxic, ecologically sound, beautiful and spiritually connected.

To learn more about Helicon Works, visit heliconworks.com. ■

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 Client's remark during a consultation

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