

# GREENING one building at a time

## GREEN SIDE UP



PATRICK LANGSTON

Patric Langevin and Christopher Straka were driving south of the Greenbelt recently when they spotted a sign for a suburban community that proclaimed "With Nature in Mind."

"We looked at each other," recalls Langevin, "and said, 'Too bad it's not impractise.'"

Langevin and Straka are partners in VERT Design Inc., an Ottawa-based green planning and design firm incorporated 15 months ago. Their mission: to practise what that sign preaches — one building at a time.

Working primarily in the residential sector, the two 32-year-olds take a holistic approach to construction and renovation, as Straka explained during a seminar at the Capital Fall Home Show last month.

Nine factors — from durability and low impact to functionality and efficiency — are considered in each VERT Design project. To better understand the benefits of low-impact construction, Straka talked about a cottage renovation in which the contractor was required to salvage and reuse studs. Pulling nails and sorting the wood took time, but then so would a trip to the local lumberyard for new material, not to mention the energy consumed in producing and shipping new studs.

Straka and Langevin also emphasize comfortable and healthy environments, meaning their projects can integrate anything from radiant floor heating to paint and cabinetry containing low or non-volatile organic compounds. They favour locally produced building materials whenever possible.

"We work to educate our clients about the options they have," says Straka, who was once a teacher.

By sorting through the options, "clients do as much work as we do, but we guide them through the process and definitely advise them," says Langevin.

Both graduates of the University of Calgary, Straka holds a master's degree in environmental design while Langevin has a master's in architecture. They've known each other since they were 18 and had worked with various urban planning and architectural firms before joining forces two summers ago.

"We were sitting at a table in Pat's backyard one afternoon and we realized we had the same vision," says Straka. "So we decided to take our lives in the same direction."



PHOTOS BY JEAN LEVAC, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

Fifteen months later, VERT Design has tackled projects in the double digits. They include the Gibbs home in Cantley (see it and other projects at [www.vertdesign.ca](http://www.vertdesign.ca)). The house, with double- and triple-glazed windows, achieves solar gain through a southerly orientation while a slab-on-grade design reduces the inevitable heat loss of a basement. The design team also specified FSC (Forest Stewardship Council) certified wood and eco-friendly adhesives, caulking and paints.

Like all VERT Design projects, the Gibbs home combines beauty, one of the firm's nine design factors, with green elements. Solar panels jutting from the roof are no longer necessary when they can be incorporated into the roof covering.

Straka and Langevin consider themselves green realists. If a client can't afford the higher cost of an ultra-efficient heating system, they'll specify a more conventional one, although building into the design the possibility for a future switchover.

They also avoid imposing standards on what makes a green design.

"That's largely defined by the

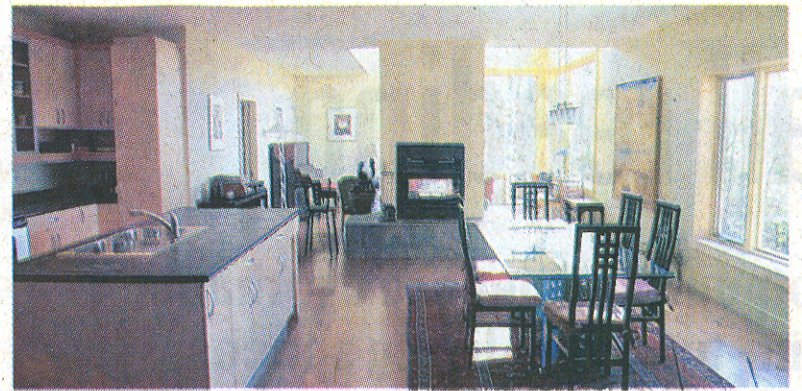
client," says Straka. "What are their goals?" The duo says that the client, often along with the contractor, is a key member of the design team.

Unfortunately, says Langevin, lenders haven't caught up with the green design movement. While long-term energy savings result from such design, banks don't acknowledge that reduced energy costs can help a borrower pay back a higher initial loan. The client arrives with a fixed amount and the designers have to work with that.

Like his business partner, Straka says he is driven by positive change. "I have the opportunity here to help people achieve a better outcome than they would otherwise."

For Langevin, that outcome has special significance: "I have a picture of my daughter on my desktop. She's eight months old. I have to be able to look her in the eye in 20 years and know I did everything possible to leave the world a good place."

Patrick Langston writes about environmental issues and trends every second week in *Style Weekly Homes*. Contact him at [careerac@ca.inter.net](mailto:careerac@ca.inter.net).



Patric Langevin, left, and Chris Straka combine comfort and energy efficiency in their green designs. The Gibbs Cantley home features large double- and triple-glazed windows for maximum solar gain.