

The Green House: Ten Years On 12.10.2008

Which comes first? The chicken, or the egg? This may be a strange question with which to start writing an article about one's home but, faced with the invitation to write about my experiences of living in *The Green House*, it seems very relevant. At the time I moved in, had anyone hinted at some of the changes that have come about in my life during the subsequent ten years, I wouldn't have believed them. In retrospect however, the seeds were sown in the design phase – during which Bill and I worked closely to achieve something that 'felt right' as an expression of me and my personality.

I didn't go specifically looking for an architect who did sustainable designs. I simply wanted someone who I could work with (I liked to think I had a fairly good sense of design yet many architects I met with left me feeling that I'd find myself in constant conflict about how the property should be because of their strong views) and who would create a building that had a sense of integrity about it. The design had to work 'as a whole'. While I could easily recognise what I liked or did not like, I had no particularly specific ideas about what I wanted. Bill obviously wanted to do an environmentally friendly house and that seemed like a good theme – so from this starting point, the project grew organically as a partnership between us.

The house's orientation to the sun is a key feature. The plot's orientation means that to make the most efficient use of passive solar heating, the large conservatory is on the south corner. The rest of the house opens into this space so that when the weather is good I can open up the doors and make use of the sun's heat, and when it's cloudy and/or cold I can close it off. This is all well and good. However, what surprised me – perhaps even astonished me – was just how aware of the sun's movement this feature made me; also of the weather in general. I'd find myself sitting for ages just watching the clouds passing through the conservatory roof ... being acutely aware of where and when the sun rose and set during the different seasons ... occasionally sitting to enjoy listening to the rain or the wind. To some extent this interest in natural phenomena had been predicted by the motif I designed for the kitchen floor (based on the four Greek elements of fire, earth, air and water) and the location of the plot (Wicken is known for Wicken Fen www.wicken.org.uk which was the National Trust's first nature reserve). However, it was a surprise to everyone, myself included, to find that within a few years I'd be formally studying traditional Chinese acupuncture – a form of medicine related to Taoism, which has a fundamental orientation to nature.

The passive solar heating works well. You have to be in the house to maximise its potential, but this suits my lifestyle; the thermostatically controls fans and ducting which were intended to circulate hot air from the top of the conservatory down to ground floor rooms have never been as effective as hoped, and in summer the roof vents need opening on hotter days. The only staircase in the house lies within the conservatory. It does get a bit chilly during winter, and you have to remember (and train guests) to shut doors, but it never gets *really* cold. This is of course great for plants – and I have now accumulated quite a collection in the conservatory.

Other energy saving features receive mixed reports. One way of determining whether something works well would be if you don't even notice it, and this would be the case for the photovoltaic system (PV or solar electricity) and solar water heating. The only blips with

these systems have been a) when BP, the manufacturers of the PV modules, requested them to be turned off for a few months due to a safety concern which was later proved to be unnecessary, however I was amply refunded for the lost power, and b) finding someone to service the solar water system every few years (I have now located a qualified engineer near Cambridge). Most of the time, I just forget about these features. The solar electricity generates [some PV generation figures] and I very rarely need additional ways of generating hot water for a large part of the year. Having grid-connected PV (so that any excess produced goes back into the National Grid) reduces your selection of electricity provider, but I am now receiving the same income per unit of electricity generated as I pay for the units I use. Grey water has been another matter, however. In fact, for the last few years I have not been recycling water at all (from baths/showers/basins and rainwater from the roof, to be used to flush toilets), due to an inability to find a company who will replace the filters and remove sediment from the tanks.

Additional but less novel features like increased insulation (my hugely thick walls), high thermal mass (the concrete upper floors) and the underfloor heating mean that the temperature in the house is fairly stable; it keeps warm in winter and it stays cool in summer. I also very much enjoy my beautiful wood-burning stove for supplementary heat and comfort in the sitting room, a space which a friend refers to as my 'snug'! Less happily, condensing boilers were fairly new back in the late 1990's so I am having to have the original replaced; sealed unit double glazing also starts to fail at around the ten year mark.

Someone writing an article on *The Green House* for a home-building magazine described it as having the feel of a 'modern cottage', which delighted me. It is at once modern and clean, yet homely. The house's design is also often referred to as 'fresh'. In Taoism, the colour green is related to the element of wood – a material which is prominent in the house (much of it stained the colour green) – and to the season of spring, during which everything is, indeed, 'fresh'. In retrospect, whether I would have chosen to have so much wood to maintain (in window frames and other exterior woodwork) had I fully appreciated the cost and/or time requirements of doing so, I am not sure. It does look good, nonetheless! Other comments have been that the house's relatively open design (largely due to the size and location of the conservatory with respect to other rooms; I deliberately went for separate rooms rather than an open plan scheme) would make it fantastic for a party – but I confess am not a party person! I do however enjoy the juxtaposition of space (the large conservatory, studio and landing area) against perhaps more intimate rooms (my 'snug', for example).

What would I change? Relatively little! Early on I started wishing for an extra foot's width in the carport (not that it is particularly cramped), and that the front porch didn't get quite so cold. The grey water and air circulation features I would not have bothered with either, though of course that's easy to say in retrospect – and, perhaps, one day the grey water system *will* get serviced and put back in action. Once more, something works well if you don't think about it much – and for the most part I just don't think about my house; I just live in it. Some years ago I wondered whether the place was too big for me and my dog, and started to enjoy fantasies of a smaller property, but this would still have been a passive solar property with many of the current features ... and in any case it didn't take very long before I dropped the idea.

Externally, the garden took some time – and effort, with the local heavy clay – to plant up. Initially I engaged a garden designer's assistance, since I had little knowledge and few skills –

but over time my interest has grown and the limited areas of planting she defined have expanded considerably – notably the vegetable patch! Sometimes I would like more integration between house and garden; the need to traverse a gravel drive to get to lawn and/or seating areas can be unwanted – but equally it is nice having the garage concealed at the back. It also feels good to at last have the stable occupied by a horse – perhaps the final piece of the original jigsaw being placed.

Like any authentic home, *The Green House* is an expression of its owner. It would not be for everyone. However, it is very much for me – maybe it even *is* me, since the principles on which it is based have to some extent embodied themselves within my life. It is still evolving too – an ongoing project; fresh, green and very much alive!

Vicki Martin