

NEW FACULTY HOUSES GO GREEN

The two newly completed faculty houses at 42 Court Street certainly *look* normal, with no telltale exterior features that would cause passersby to stop and stare.

But looks can be deceiving. These four-bedroom homes, one tan, one beige, are actually “green houses,” and almost everything about their design and construction is intended to increase their energy efficiency and decrease their environmental impact. Designed by TMS Architects and built by Bruss Construction (with PEA’s Mike Searle-Spratt serving as construction project manager and Anita Bailey as design manager), the houses are part of the Academy’s ongoing efforts to incorporate sustainable features into its building and renovation projects. Both houses were funded as a result of gifts to The Exeter Initiative’s Community Housing Initiative.



In August, English instructor Ralph Sneed, his wife, Gwen, and their three children moved into Valhoul House (rear), one of two new faculty homes that feature sustainable design and construction. “We’ve always been deliberate about conserving water and energy,” says Sneed (with children Jake ’07, Eliza and Madeleine ’09). “But this place makes it easier, because the technology, appliances and hardware make the decisions for you.”

Starting with the construction phase itself, the contractor was committed to recycling a minimum of 75 percent of all construction waste. Each home is super insulated, from their poured-concrete foundations to their cellulose-lined attics. The houses’ exterior walls are built from structurally insulated panels that are 10 ¼ inches thick. The windows are triple-glazed, and all the lighting is fluorescent, both indoors and out. Together, these features are expected to reduce utility consumption by 50 percent (compared to utility usage in the adjacent faculty houses, built in 2002). The houses are also designed to eliminate the use of fossil fuels, thanks to a geothermal HVAC system that provides both heating and air conditioning and to heat recovery systems that recapture energy.

Since moving out of their dorm apartment in Cilley Hall in mid-August, the Sneed family has settled in nicely to Valhoul House, which was named in honor of the late English instructor

James Valhoul. (The other faculty house is now home to John Blackwell, astronomy instructor and director of Grainger Observatory, and his family.) In fact, English instructor Ralph Sneed, his wife, Gwen, and their children, Jake ’07, Madeleine ’09 and 12-year-old Eliza, sometimes have to remind themselves that their new house is unlike most others.

“The differences between this house and our old house are very subtle, and really have no impact on our lifestyle,” Sneed says. “We’ve always been deliberate about conserving water and energy. But this place makes it easier, because the technology, appliances and hardware make the decisions for you. The stove, although it’s electric, heats up instantly, and many of the closet lights have motion sensors.” Each house has high-efficiency washers and dryers, dishwashers and refrigerators.

Valhoul House’s only environmental giveaways are its solar panels, which were donated by the class of 2007 as their senior class gift and are mounted on the south roof. “It’s really the only component of the house that suggests ‘greenness,’” Sneed says. “You have to look pretty hard, otherwise, to see it.”

Other aspects of green design, such as the geothermal air-conditioning and the fluorescent lighting, are taking them a little longer to get used to. “Normally, we’re not ‘AC people,’” Sneed says. “We like the windows wide open in the summer and can usually deal with the two or three hot nights. But the kids are sort of thrilled with the option, so in August and early September it was a family decision; we all had to agree on whether to shut all the

windows, or leave them open and turn on the fans.”

One of the family’s former creature comforts was old-fashioned light bulbs, which are less energy efficient than compact fluorescent lighting. Sneed says they’ve been pleased to discover that, contrary to their expectations, “the existing lighting in this house is surprisingly comfortable, and doesn’t bathe the place in gray, depressing light.”

The entire family is thrilled with the first floor’s open floor plan, which allows natural light to fill the kitchen and living and dining areas during the day. “We suspect that the New England winter will be a lot easier to manage with more light. We won’t feel like we’re living in a cave. And because the walls are so thick, the window casements are deep and give the rooms character,” he says.

Besides all that natural light, the floor plan also means the family gets to see a lot more of each other. Says Sneed, “Here, we can’t hide!”

—Famebridge Witherspoon

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