

TODD JERSEY ARCHITECTURE

'This Green House'

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For 14 years, he was America's restoration guru -- by all appearances an unlikely spokesman for the tool-belt set with his smart-guy spectacles and degree in philosophy.

But now Steve Thomas, the onetime host of PBS' "This Old House" who later jumped to the History Channel to explore the past, has returned to the present and his TV roots.

You might call his newest venture "This Green House" although the official title of his new show is "Renovation Nation." It's all about going green on the homefront, and it's taken the handyman, accustomed to staying put at one project for an entire TV season, to every corner of the country -- from Albuquerque to Philly, Maine to Raleigh, Atlanta to Chicago, Boston to New Orleans.

When the Discovery network starts broadcasting its new, 24-hour "Planet Green" programming in June, the hour-long daily show "Renovation Nation" will be the very first to air.

Thomas' mad dash across a greening America brought him to Sonoma County recently, where he visited with a Kenwood couple who are living a close-to-sustainable lifestyle. He also stopped by Liberty Doors company in Cotati, which makes custom doors built to last a lifetime from wood sustainably harvested, recycled or reclaimed.

Quality construction that lasts is one of the most important components of green building, and yet one of the most overlooked, said Thomas, taking a break to lunch on a fresh fried egg just plucked from the henhouse of Kenwood homeowners Mark Feichtmeir and Karen Boness.

"Quality workmanship is what green building is about. It's about building a house that will last 100 years with very little maintenance. So that means every little detail has to be correct," he said.

"The way the windows are flashed into the concrete walls; the way the roof is flashed. You want to keep water out of a building. That is the key enemy of a building. How you build a house to stand up to the elements without self-destructing.

"If you build a house that was moderately energy efficient that would last for 100 years, I would argue that is a greener house than building a super energy-efficient house that is designed to fall apart in 20 years."

Thomas, who won multiple Emmy Awards for his stint on "This Old House," aims to spotlight all of the key components of green construction. That also means energy efficiency, design, eco-friendly building materials and a concern for health by avoiding toxics.

He draws in a notebook a quick sketch of a series of bubbles, each one representing a green component with an "energy" bubble at the very top.

"Energy is key," declared the iconic do-it-yourselfer, who grew up in El Cerrito and Berkeley and learned basic construction skills from a dad who made extra money refurbishing homes. He said he managed to increase the energy efficiency of his 18th-century home in Massachusetts by 30 percent by auditing the house for leaks, closing them, adding more insulation and replacing a 16-year-old boiler with a more efficient model.

"The biggest bang for your buck is insulation," he said. "I've seen people in the northeast who have almost no insulation and for \$5,000 they can do a first-class job and make it back in two years, and from then on it's free money."

In his new show, Thomas will spotlight projects he says range from "deep green to light green," from small homes in urban settings to showplaces like the intricately designed home of Boness and Feichtmeir.

The pair invested an inheritance into designing and building a home from the ground up that not only was beautiful but incorporated as many green building practices as possible, ranging from solar panels to energy-efficient PISE construction -- an earthen material blasted into forms of plywood and wood.

They've brought their energy use so low they're selling back to PG&E, have a geothermal heat pump for the radiant heating in the floors and they are even catching 50 percent of their own water from rainfall dropping on the roof and down into a 50,000 gallon cistern beneath their garage.

Boness, a landscape designer, has woven principles of permaculture throughout the grounds. Permaculture is a design philosophy that encompasses a set of principles aimed at building an ecologically sustainable home with abundant and productive gardens, she explained, showing off a garden filled with culinary and medicinal herbs, fruit trees and plants designed to attract butterflies, bees and other beneficial insects. A pond with a waterfall fed by reclaimed rainwater provides habitat for birds, insects, salamanders and frogs. The entire garden has been designated an official Backyard Wildlife Habitat by the National Wildlife Federation.

Permaculture design takes into account everything from soil and water management to attracting wildlife. Productive food plants are incorporated into the landscape. Microclimates within the landscape are considered and put to their best use. While up on the roof inspecting the solar panels, Boness was suddenly inspired to think about ways to use their protective shade for seed starting. An entire homesite is developed with an eye on becoming a highly functioning ecosystem, she said.

The couple are so committed to the sustainable good life that they plan to host their own monthly tours of the house to show others how it is done (www.kenwoodpermaculture.com).

Thomas, who saw the green light back in the 1970s as a student at the progressive Evergreen College in Washington, said he's now on a green streak, fully committed to devoting the next part of his career to promoting more sustainable building practices.

"What I think is important about the green movement is that it is a movement, and it does have a name and there are a bunch of different ways you can get into it, whether it is on the energy side or the design side or the workmanship," he said.

"My mission in this show and it's what I'll spend the rest of my life doing, is doing what I can to help people want to build better, smaller, more efficient houses that will last longer, that are better designed, are healthier to live in and that require zero energy."

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