

# Building the Old and New Way

By Jeanne Brooks • November 15, 2009

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First, he took three weeks off to think it all through again and make a decision.

This was in 2000. Scott Johnston had just finished work on the Governor's School for the Arts. He'd been the project architect.

Now he weighed opening his own firm. A small practice, as Johnston pictured it, doing small buildings.

The focus would be sustainability — buildings that were, among other things, highly energy efficient and worked with natural factors of a site, for instance the lay of the land and how much sunlight it got.

He'd talked to a number of people about his idea, some of them architects, some not. No one seemed to think it would work. It was a noble impulse but where would he find any clients?

Still, Johnston believed in what he wanted to do and, in 2001, opened Johnston Design Group. He was one of only two LEED-accredited architects in the state at that time, he recalls, and the only one in private practice.

LEED is an internationally-recognized certification, with various levels, established by the U.S. Green Building Council. It sets rigorous standards for high-performance sustainable design and construction.

The clients came.

Johnston's challenge, as it turned out, wasn't locating customers so much as locating local vendors and builders then who understood and respected the concept.

"Ten years ago," he says, "there was maybe one solar vendor," for whom it was a part-time job. And nobody he knew was doing geothermal.

A key part of sustainability is buying local materials and products as much as possible. It's good for the environment, Johnston notes, and also good for the local economy.

Overcoming misperceptions regarding cost was another challenge. For example, an early goal of Johnston's was to recycle 75 percent of construction waste versus sending it to a landfill.



*Local architect Scott Johnston designed the renovation of Upstate Forever's office, which was awarded LEED Platinum Certification, the highest designation for sustainable buildings. (JEANNE BROOKS/Staff)*

“Builders originally thought it would cost more money (to do that),” he recalls. Once they tried it, builders found recycling cost less.

Likewise, he says, you can construct a home that’s 30 percent more energy efficient for the same cost it takes to build what is today a more typical house. Then every month afterwards, for the life of the house, the energy-efficient homeowner will get heating and air conditioning bills that are almost one-third lower.

If a homeowner were able to spend a little more money than for a typical house, a home could be made even more energy efficient. And the savings on heating and air bills would more than compensate for the difference in mortgage payments.

Sustainable design starts with principles that go back to the way all architecture used to be done, by paying attention to and working with the natural setting, Johnston says.

Technology, such as a radiant heat barrier in the roof that keeps the attic 20-30 percent cooler, comes next.

Johnston’s firm designed the renovation of the 1916 house in Greenville that became Upstate Forever’s main office. It attained the very highest LEED certification, platinum. There’s only one other in the state, 54 in the world.

Yes, he says, “We’re proud of it.”

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