



Feature

# Conscious Construction

## Building for Tomorrow

BY MARDY JOHNSTON PHOTOS BY JEFF SHAWER





**WHEN YOU DREAMED** of owning your first home, how did you envision it? Was it on a cul-de-sac or in a sprawling neighborhood? Was it wood or stucco? Did it have the proverbial white picket fence? Did it look exactly like the home just 10 feet to the left? Prospective homeowners are beginning to dig a little deeper when they envision their next home. With the epidemic of subdivisions and the "tidal wave effect" some experts say the Northstate will see in population growth stemming from Sacramento, many are demanding that their abode not only be aesthetically pleasing, but leave a smaller environmental footprint.

The Northstate is growing faster than ever before; and as the construction business strives to meet (or create) demand, "it's gone into a disposable society," says Chico contractor Laurie Norton. "Is that the right approach? I don't know."

Norton is one of a handful of contractors and developers who are willing to sacrifice higher profits for lower economical impact. While building to leave a lighter eco-footprint may save the soul, it certainly costs more than the droves of cookie-cutter houses. But, "in our building and development, if we spend more money in a project, we can save on energy," Norton surmises. "I've made a choice to make less money."

Aside from ideas that would obviously make more sense in the green department (more windows for better airflow, recycled products when applicable), Norton has made considerable changes to the way he builds each home. He's changed his stud bays to 2x6 dimensions instead of 2x4, resulting in less material use. And, he uses a foil-backed roof sheeting that can create a 10-degree difference in the temperature of the house.

Norton is adamant about using salvaged lumber for cabinets and door trims, a practice known as Green Building in the industry (see "Restoring the Earth," page 58).

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Norton recently completed a 2,054-square-foot home in Chico with green considerations.

The simply designed home took eight months to complete. It's inviting, with neutral tones and natural light throughout. "The only place you can see that it's energy efficient is the thickness of the windowsills," he says. The concrete floors and countertops are a great source of insulation.

The modern-looking wooden stairwell is constructed completely of salvaged material. The landing is set up for the kids "with no downgrades," Norton says. Windows are located on opposite walls to increase air flow and use less energy during the summer.

The cabinets and desks in the kids' rooms are built in, and the lighting is low wattage.

In the master bathroom, a stone color palette enabled Norton to make the concrete floor lighter, providing a light, airy feel to a room with a lot of natural light. The house was deliberately designed for the master backyard to be mostly shaded. The windows were designed to be high and the ceilings were capped at eight feet. "Nine to 10 feet, that's just volume," Norton says.

This was the first time he included the Zen system, a high-tech wiring system that controls most if not all of the home's electronics through a 5x5-inch wall mount. "It is what I believe is going to be part of the future," he says. The house was constructed with this system in mind, so wires were built into the walls; every plug was set up just so. With this system, "people don't need five computers in the same house," Norton says.

"This house had more than we were looking for and it was in our price range," says owner Maria Venturina. "We're very happy with it."



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"I'm building what I want to build," Norton boasts. "That's the fun of it. If you walk from this house to my house, you'll see a lot of similarities."

Another consciously constructed Chico home designed by contractor Robin Trendera shares green similarities with Norton's, but in many ways is completely different.

"I wanted to build a well-built, super energy-efficient building that uses nature for heating and cooling," Trendera says. "The ceiling elevation draws cool air in, and the windows provide most of the light. This house breathes really well. There's constantly a flow of fresh air."

The home is equipped with a radiant heat slab that can preheat water through solar power, and

there's also a whole-house water filtration system.

Trendera sought out construction materials specifically designed for green building. With the rise in demand for materials such as paint and glue that are free of chemicals, there are entire companies or at least divisions of companies that solely provide eco-friendly materials like formaldehyde-free glues. However, like Norton, Trendera has found that these materials cost more than the "cheap and quick" materials that are often found in new homes.

Aside from the green building techniques, both houses are built with function and form. They're beautifully designed with modern floorplans and designs that would rival any modern home, such as Trendera's "wet room" for the kids' bathroom or Norton's Zen electronics system.

Trendera says that's the ideal of conscious construction. "If you build for aesthetic and beauty, that's going to ensure that what you build will last a long time."