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Posted on Sat, Jan. 01, 2005

Aledo contractor sees greener pastures professionally

By Liz Stevens
Star-Telegram Staff Writer

I guess it's not nice to brag, but that isn't one of my New Year's resolutions, so ...

Don Ferrier built my house.

OK, not my whole house. Just the addition we did last year. The bedroom-bathroom-laundry room that we wanted to be environmentally friendly and energy-efficient.

And now Ferrier is famous. OK, not *famous* famous, but definitely garnering some national attention for his dedication to reducing residential energy needs.

Of note:

• On Jan. 13, Ferrier will accept the 2005 Energy Value Housing Award in the Custom Home/Hot Climate category. The 5,000-square-foot residence that he built is in Parker County. The award ceremony is in Orlando, Fla., at the International Builders Show.

• The Aledo-area house he will build for his daughter, Heather, has been chosen to participate in the Department of Energy's Building America program this year and is the first Building America project in West Texas. It will be designed by architect Gary Olp of GGOArchitects, a notable Dallas-based practitioner of green/sustainable design.

• Next weekend, a Ferrier-built/GGO-designed home will loom above the exhibits, demonstrations and seminars at the Arlington Convention Center when "Dirt Doctor" Howard Garrett brings his House and Organic Gardening Show to Tarrant County. The event is shaping up to be the largest showcase for eco-conscious building products the Metroplex has ever seen.

We found Ferrier Builders at a sustainability fair in Dallas in May 2003. Of a mere dozen booths, he was one of two general contractors who had set up shop (only months later, the other laid off its green-building staff). It's not easy to find a builder in these parts who both understands what "green" is and doesn't roll his or her eyes when you say it. That said, Ferrier was more knowledgeable about energy-efficient materials than about green products, but he was willing to learn along with us.

And not once did he roll his eyes (at least not about our green commitment).

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Don Ferrier and daughter Heather show off some of their structural insulated panels used in "green" construction. The panels help reduce insulation gaps and retain heat better.

Ferrier's grandfather emigrated from Scotland in 1881. A stonemason, he helped to build the Texas State Capitol. Ferrier's father and uncles turned that skill to building bridges. And so did Don, until a homeowner wanting an earth-shelter home came to him in 1981 looking for help constructing the home's concrete shell.

"And structural concrete was my heritage, in a way," says Ferrier, whose business was based in Seymour back then. (Earth-shelter houses are built into/under the ground and typically have roofs of reinforced concrete.)

By the mid-'80s, Ferrier had liquidated the bridge company and was focusing almost completely on building earth-shelter homes, which are inherently energy-efficient. By the time he was introduced to structural insulated panels, or SIPs, later that decade, he was fully on the energy-efficiency bandwagon.

SIPs are pre-constructed exterior walls: Oreo cookies, if you will, of oriented strand board (OSB) filled with foam insulation. They arrive at the building site pre-cut with openings for doors and windows and result in a building with fewer insulation gaps. SIP walls also don't let heat pass through as readily as wood-frame walls.

Ferrier became a SIPs convert.

"I think the world of earth-shelter" homes, he says. But they are more expensive to build, more difficult to site and harder to finance than SIP houses, which look the same as conventionally built homes. But the folks for whom he built the homes ratcheted up his enthusiasm for SIPs.

"The clients that built this way were so absolutely ecstatic about it, and I realized the benefit to them [increased comfort, lower energy bills]. It gives you the desire to provide that to others."

Ferrier, whose current office is in Aledo, is on the board of the national Structural Insulated Panel Association. He was invited to construct the green home for the House and Organic Gardening Show after participating in the event its first two years.

He and Olp have 4 1/2 days to build the 2-story residence in a 30-foot-by-50-foot space inside the convention center. Only part of the home, however, will be finished out; three other areas will be left intentionally raw for visitors to see and study the environmentally friendly wall systems, including SIPs, insulated concrete forms (ICFs) and foam insulation.

The home will also feature Hardiplank siding; cork, Marmoleum and/or bamboo flooring; a tankless water heater; and rain-water collection.

"They feel like green is just a tidal wave that's coming," Ferrier says of the show organizers' decision to emphasize green building products.

And after years of promoting energy efficiency, Ferrier believes "the average person out there is getting it. We're going [to have to] sip energy, not guzzle it ... you can't afford not to."

Howard Garrett's big show

The House and Organic Gardening Show with Howard Garrett runs Friday through Sunday at the Arlington Convention Center, 1200 Ballpark Way. Besides green-building products, the event will feature an organic gardening marketplace, natural products area, organic cooking stage and kids "fun center."

Hours are 2-8 p.m. Friday, 10 a.m.-8 p.m. Saturday, 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Sunday. Admission is \$7 for 17 and older, \$3.50 for 13-16, free for kids younger than 13. For more information, www.dirtdoctor.com.

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