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LIVING PASSIVE



Couple's 'forever home' in McMinnville designed to be easy on the Earth

This is the final installment of a three-part series about a home constructed to meet strict "passiv haus" standards, which builder Cellar Ridge Construction believes makes it the most environmentally friendly house in McMinnville.

By STARLA POINTER
Of the News-Register

Walk into John and Debbie Pitney's new home, and you'll notice the openness of the floor plan, the freshness of the air, the character of the wooden shelves, the brightness of the pops of color against the plain white walls.

You probably won't see, at first, how thick and well-insulated the exterior walls are, compared to those of a typical house. Or realize right away that the large windows are clustered

on the south side, to take advantage of warm sunlight.

You may admire the sparkly kitchen counters, without realizing they're made of recycled glass and mirror. You may wash your hands in the bathroom without noticing the vanity — like those character-filled wooden shelves — was fashioned of reclaimed wood.

You may not even realize the water trickling from the tap was collected from the steeply pitched roof, then filtered to make it potable for drinking and cooking as well as washing and flushing. It's the first local home with a potable water rainwater collection system, McMinnville Water & Light said.

But maybe you noticed the Chevy

Volt in the driveway, and you realized this house might be different.

In fact, from the walls to the layout to the fixtures to the electric car charger, it's dedicated to being as environmentally friendly as possible. Called a "passiv haus," it's built to standards developed in Germany.

The term "passive" refers to the orientation designed to catch winter sunlight, the heavily insulated walls and floor, the solar power array and the rainwater collection system. No ongoing "action" is needed to make it environmentally sound; that's built in.

The Pitneys, both retired Methodist ministers, are dedicated environmen-

talists. "We've been working on living with less for a long time," John said.

They've been pleased to see their personal efforts become part of a more global movement.

"It's a challenge to make the (worldwide) cuts we need to make," he said. "Changes need to be fast, drastic and on a lot of levels."

When he and his wife decided to retire to McMinnville, they saw an opportunity not only to live their ideals, but to serve as an example to others. They wanted to prove an energy-efficient and earth-friendly house could be affordable and comfortable, while still fitting into an existing neighborhood.

Left: John and Debbie Pitney relax in the entryway of their "passive house" built by Cellar Ridge Construction. Skylights make the space bright and cheerful.

Below: A bank of solar panels provides power to the home. Excess electricity is diverted into the grid. Rockne Roll/News-Register

*"We've been
working on
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John Pitney

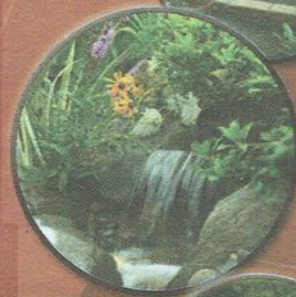


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The couple worked with architect Matt Daby and Cellar Ridge Construction to design their new home from the ground up.

In addition, they used their own hands to tear down an aging house in one of McMinnville's oldest neighborhoods, west of Adams Street and south of Memorial Elementary School. They saved as many of the floorboards and other materials as possible.

Then Cellar Ridge crews dug into the dirt to create the outline of a 1,000-square-foot, two bedroom, two-bathroom structure the Pitneys call their "forever home."

Workers put down multiple layers of foam insulation before pouring the concrete slab. Then they erected thick, heavily insulated walls and covered them with a self-sealing vapor barrier.

Window and door openings were pre-planned to take advantage of sunlight. The walls were finished off with

silvery metal siding or cedar planks. Red metal and solar panels were used to cover the roof.

Inside, the Pitneys did much of the finishing themselves. In addition to painting the walls white, they installed cork flooring. It's great to walk on, they said.

The couple moved into their passive house at the end of March, and they love it. "It's very livable," Debbie said.

It turned out the way it was supposed to, John said, and "it takes hardly any energy to run."

In their first few weeks in the house, when April temperatures soared to record highs, the Pitneys discovered just how well their windows let in the sunlight. "It became clear quickly that it will be a greater challenge to keep the house cool than to keep it warm," John said.

It won't be a major problem, though, he said. He and Debbie said



Above: John Pitney explains the operation of his home's solar panel system. This spring, it has produced more electricity than they've used to power their house and car. Opposite: Debbie Pitney works in the office. To save space and make the home more energy efficient, it doubles as a guest room; a Murphy bed is concealed inside the cabinet. Rockne Roll/News-Register

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they will open the windows to capture cool air. They also plan to add cloth shades to block some of the sun's rays in summer, and grow grapes along the south side of the house. They have no need, nor desire, for air conditioning, they said.

John said he doesn't expect to make much use of the small heater connected to the air exchanger either. Body heat and the clothes dryer will contribute to keeping the house warm in the winter, he said.

"But you never know in Oregon," he added.

John grew up on a farm west of Junction City. As a boy, he said, he wondered why his parents reused things. Now he's avid about that himself.

He used the wood they'd reclaimed from the previous house to build the bathroom vanities, baseboards and window ledges. Old floorboards became shelves.

"I'm proud of the things I built," he

said, noting that he used the workshop at his church, McMinnville Cooperative Ministries.

Outside, he and Debbie installed reused redwood fencing. They said it was 30 to 40 years old already, but still good for another few decades. They used juniper posts, harvested in Central Oregon, to form a grape arbor.


The grape vines, fruit trees, vegetable garden and landscape plants will soften the appearance of the three giant rainwater storage tanks in

the backyard.

The redwood fence screens the entire yard from the street. Outside, they've created a swale planted with rushes and other damp-loving native plants.

In late May, the Pitneys were still landscaping the exterior, putting in a patio and planting dozens of dwarf fruit trees.

Their hard work was frequently interrupted by passers-by, curious



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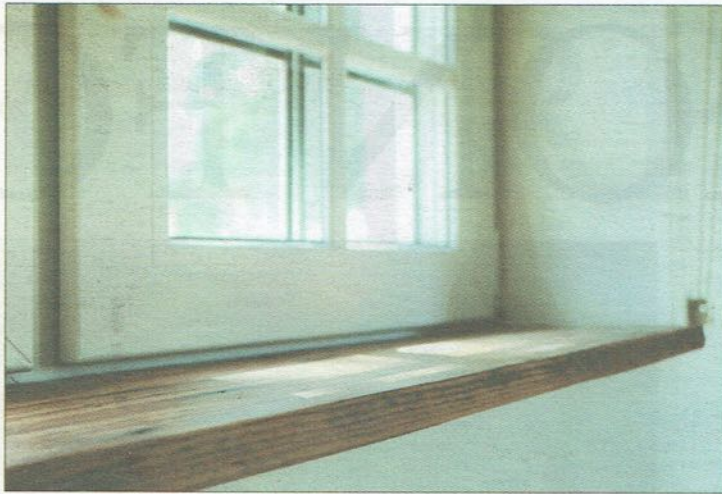
Above: The living room of the passive house features large south-facing windows that provide natural light and heat.

Right: A red metal roof tops the Pitneys' passive house. Rain that falls on the steep slope will be collected and filtered for drinking, washing dishes and other household uses.

Opposite: Many of the wooden surfaces in the Pitneys' new passive house in McMinnville, like the windowsill, were made from wood reclaimed from an older structure that used to sit on the site. The new home's extra-thick walls, background, help retain heat.

Rockne Roll/News-Register





about the house's design and construction. Several times a week, they invited new-found friends in for a tour.

They like to show off the house's "lungs," an air exchange system that refreshes the interior air every two hours.

They also enjoy pointing out the readout showing how much electricity is being produced by the solar panels on the roof. So far, they've sent more energy to Water & Light than they've

received from the utility in exchange.

The Pitneys are happy to have a chance to encourage others to become more environmentally friendly.

"Everybody can make changes that will help," Debbie said. A good way to start, she said, is to replace conventional light bulbs with LEDs, as it's easy, quick and inexpensive.

"If everybody did just a few things, we could begin to make a big impact," she said.

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