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Model home

Hudson architect aims to raise bar for energy efficiency
By Chris Churchill Staff Writer
Published 01:00 a.m., Sunday, July 11, 2010

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Dennis Wedlick's "passive house" is under construction in Claverack, Columbia County. Builders raised its frame last month, and plan on completing it by September. Wedlick hopes the home will serve as a new model for energy-efficient dwellings. (Kayla Galway / Times Union)



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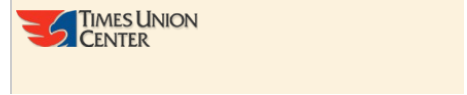
CLAVERACK -- We have bad news about your house. It's a sieve.

It leaks cold air in the summer. It leaks hot air in the winter. It's not your fault. Nearly every home is built this way.

"People have no idea that they're air conditioning the outdoors," says Hudson architect **Dennis Wedlick**. "You might as well sit on your patio with an air conditioner blowing right at you."

Wedlick is the architect of a house that is quite different. It's a building that doesn't leak. It barely needs artificial heat or air conditioning. The architecture of the house, mostly, keeps it naturally cool and warm. Compared with a conventional home, it cuts energy consumption

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by as much as 90 percent.

The house -- three bedrooms, two bathrooms -- is under construction right now in Claverack, the Columbia County town near Hudson. Builders raised its frame last month, and plan on having it complete by September. It's even for sale.

The so-called "passive house" is no doubt cutting edge, at least in the United States. But Wedlick hopes -- believes! -- the Hudson Passive Project, as it's called, will be a model for thousands of similar homes. Its tools, after all, are widely available. There's no reason it can't be a prototype.

"The method of construction is so easy to duplicate," Wedlick said. "You don't have to start from scratch."

Passive home technology really isn't all that new. Some passive home ideas were developed in the 1970s. But many of its principles are actually old-fashioned, used by home builders in the thousands of years before modern heat and air-conditioning systems led to a more casual approach to home positioning.

Several passive design fundamentals are being used for the Claverack home, according to Wedlick. They are:

Compactness. Passive homes are designed to use space and materials as efficiently as possible. That doesn't mean they're small, necessarily. It just means they must not waste space with useless hallways or soaring ceilings that add little to the quality of the space.

Tightness. Joints in passive homes are sealed to prevent air from leaking. There are no drafts, and there's none of the dampness-causing humidity that penetrates conventional homes in the summer. (That's assuming, of course, that you don't open the windows.)

Flowing air. The houses are positioned to block the hot sun in the summer and maximize the warming sun in the winter. And they're constructed with extreme consideration of how air moves through a home. "Some of these principles are ancient," Wadlick said. "What has been developed in modern times is the preciseness of that, of how to maximize heating and cooling in our environment."

Air exchange. The [Hudson house](#), like other passive houses, will be built with an air-exchange device that sucks fresh air into the house and expels interior air. But it transfers the heat (or coolness in the summer) from the old air to the new air.

"Sometimes I refer to it as the magic box," Wedlick said. "This is the one piece of technology (used in the [Claverack house](#)) that is relatively new."

Remember that a passive home is airtight. So the air exchanger is especially important, because without it no new air is coming into the building. The air would soon be too stale for comfort.

"It is so airtight that you would very quickly want to open up a window," Wedlick said.

Most descriptions of passive homes remark on how clean and healthy the air feels. There is no heater blowing dusty air at you, or sucking the moisture from the room.

Wedlick stresses that a passive home can deliver that wonderful air without sacrificing style or additional comfort.

Indeed, renderings of the home he designed in Claverack don't show a bunker-like structure half buried in the dirt. Instead, they show a modern and airy home, with a stone exterior, a barn-like shape, a wall of glass windows and soaring 22-foot ceilings.

Alas, most of us will never live in a truly passive home. We are seemingly forever relegated to leaky and drafty homes.

But Wedlick said passive homes provide lessons on how nearly every home can improve its energy efficiency. Many of their principles are widely applicable.

The air exchangers, for example, are available for purchase and can help the energy efficiency of most homes. Nearly every big-box hardware store, Wedlick notes, sells kits that can help a homeowner curb the air leaks.

And a multitude of products -- like insulated window shades -- will be used in the Claverack house and can be used in your home, too.

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Or maybe you can just buy the Claverack home, which is being constructed by the [Bill Stratton Building Co.](#) and funded in part by a grant from the [New York State Energy Research and Development Authority](#).

It won't come cheap. The final price for the home and surrounding seven acres at 349 Millbrook Road hasn't been determined, but it will be in the \$500,000 to \$700,000 range. Gabel Real Estate in Spencertown is the broker.

"It seemed possible that even in this economy we could find the right buyer," Wedlick said. "And we're hoping to do so as quickly as possible."

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