

# Sustaining the Good Life

by Lars Stanley and Lauren Woodward

In our practice of architecture and craft, we design as well as construct things—buildings, lighting, gates, and a variety of architectural elements. Combining the design process with physically making things exposes us to multiple layers of experience and lessons. As anyone knows who has tried it, it's a lot easier to draw a wall straight and plumb than it is to actually build it straight and plumb. Knowledge of the constraints and properties of materials, and the methods and tools available to work them, can take a designer or craftsman a lifetime to acquire. A good cabinetmaker, metalworker or contractor acquires knowledge through study and years of practice. The tangible results of competent craft are easily recognized and appreciated.

We value our involvement in both designing and building many of our projects and being able to draw lessons from these dual vantage points. Gaining an understanding of the practical aspects of building instills a discipline with which we develop and realize our designs. When we initially design something, we try not to limit our creativity. Designs may reflect an idealized version of what we and our clients want to build, aspirations that reflect our culture and time. Expanding into the reality of construction tends to bridle these aspirations, and coping with budgets, limitations and constraints is often a splash of cold water, snapping us out of our dream world. This is not a bad thing. It energizes our efforts to meld the ideal with the real to produce something unexpected, grounded, and gratifying.

## Sustainability is paramount

Lessons learned from this interplay have helped us create an approach that causes us to look beyond the project at hand and examine the larger context within which we are working, of which we are a part, and indeed that we are helping to create. Some of the most profound lessons we draw from these experiences have to do with sustainability—with resources, energy, the building industry, and the life we call good. In our evaluation, the most important of these concerns is energy use, which figures prominently in every sector of modern life. There



are obvious hints of limitations to come, in the rumblings at the gas pump and in the price of plywood or concrete or steel. A little research reveals many early warnings from qualified sources telling us that we need to pay more attention to the bigger picture with regard to the resources and energy we use.

Unfortunately, it seems that the message of the "Peak Oil" scenario—the decline of oil and all that depends upon it—is not being broadcast, heard, or heeded seriously enough. If we are concerned with meeting our future needs, even in the relatively short-term, we need to scrutinize and modify our interpretation of the good life. Part of this homework is to comprehend our society's, and our own, resource consumption and enjoyment of cheap oil.

It is no exaggeration to say the time has passed for us to make an easy transition



from a world of easily accessible energy to limited access to energy. Whether or not it would ever have been a smooth transition is a moot point by now, but it is clear it will be more and more of a painful prospect to the extent we ignore this elephant in the room.

We have known for many years that carbon emissions and greenhouse gases are increasing. We all know that historically the United States is the biggest contributor to greenhouse gases and chews up the most energy, although now China and India are following cue in rapid pace.

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Perhaps not as well known is that the construction industry is the single largest consumer of energy in the United States, an astonishing fact. Residential, commercial and industrial buildings, in their annual operations and incorporation of energy-embodied manufactured products, consume forty-eight percent of all energy used in this country (see [www.architecture2030.org](http://www.architecture2030.org)) and residential buildings account for over half of that.

So how we design and build our homes, how we build our good life, is directly and immediately relevant to our connection to the rest of the world, and to our security in it. How we address the connective tissue between the structures we live in—how much and how often we drive to get to our places of work, school, social activities and shopping—should be an equal part of this examination. How much paved infrastructure must be part and parcel of our good life? How much direct and embodied energy derived from fossil fuels is our good life built upon? Can we do better? Can we imagine better? If so, we stand to enrich our lives and our culture. If not, can we appreciate the longer term effects of our present choices on our future and our children's future?

#### Cultivating a broad perspective

Over years spent in practice, we have cultivated important perspectives which become tools to apply in ever-widening circles. The processes inherent in design and craft ultimately "brew" an ability for critical thinking. When designing and making things, one becomes aware of, and then increasingly familiar with, the conditions and constraints outside oneself. This informs the next step of designing and making things.

To some extent, this is the process of life itself—what we do as living, learning human beings in our given environments. The first step is to want to engage with the terms of our world, and the second is to gain more awareness of something than we had before. Recognizing the evident nature of our energy situation lays the foundation for interacting and dealing with it in appropriate ways. Cheap oil makes us feel as though there are no constraints, a precarious and deceptive state of mind, and one that in the arena of design or craft, results in an unimaginative and often bad or irrelevant product.

Expanding our understanding of the evolving energy crisis takes effort and requires exiting our comfort zone, but with this effort comes discovery, new perspectives, and further layers of understanding, all leading to important choices we may not have thought we had. Already, many strategies exist as alternatives to our current energy-consumption practices, as addressed in a multitude of venues, including the "Green Building" feature published in the June 2005 issue of this magazine. (Available on-line at [www.goodlifemag.com/archives/06-05/06-05\\_green-building.htm](http://www.goodlifemag.com/archives/06-05/06-05_green-building.htm).)

A close look at basic lifestyle choices is a good way to reexamine the good life. One strategy that can have a significant impact is choosing to work at home or close to home, which eliminates or reduces transportation time and cost as well as general stress. Working close to home can also have deep impacts on family and community, weaving bonds among children, the elderly and neighbors. It encourages the formation of memorable, multi-layered work and living spaces, and sustaining relationships; it fos-

ters a vibrant modern village life. The relief it affords on congested roadways is obvious.

Another strategy for reducing our dependence on cheap energy is tied up with transportation of goods: to the extent possible, we can choose locally made products across the board, on all scales of activity, from building a house to feeding a household. This strategy has equally significant ramifications for the community at large in that it energizes local and regional economies and building pride of place.

Considering sustainable strategies within a more integrative, social, and contextual framework, rather than from a purely technical perspective, is what has to happen to make real progress.

#### Our office is our laboratory

Our own living and working spaces at Stanley Architects and Artisans take these cues. Maximizing natural lighting, integrating proper orientation and ventilation, designing an efficient building envelope and reusing materials, are all standard practice. We have also tried to investigate how alternative fuel sources, water collection and treatment methods, grey-water usage, to name some techniques, can be practically integrated into our own use of resources. We are interested in the green, or planted, roof as a tool, used with appropriate regional refinements, to improve upon an important building surface usually underestimated in terms of its potential, and we are studying its implementation in our own projects to gauge its benefits to the site and beyond. Another example: in previous studios and in one currently under construction, we've integrated photovoltaic systems into the electrical set-up, supplying a significant part of the power needs in our office.

For powering shop tools, we have been studying systems that can store energy for future use. One type uses photovoltaic power to operate a small motor that generates compressed air, which is stored in a large tank waiting to be used by pneumatic tools. Another approach takes advantage of older tools that are counterweighted. Many of these tools were designed in an era before cheap energy, taking advantage of centrifugal forces with simple designs that allow use of smaller motors and reduce energy use. The relevance of this energy-saving strategy is being rediscovered, an exciting prospect to us.

We will often go out on a limb to try out unconventional systems on our personal projects to see how well they will address our objectives. If the systems, materials, and methods we test are successful, we will use them on other projects, from individual homes to institutional projects like schools and libraries. The hands-on creative approach we've become accustomed to with design has helped us immensely in this respect. These adaptations won't singularly change the world but they do lead to expanding levels of experience and awareness and gradually more sophisticated responses. We hope to learn from this work, and from what others are doing, and try to implement what we believe are appropriate responses to critical issues facing us today. **g**

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