

ASK [?]JUDITH

Go! Green! WASA Strikes Back, and What IS That Smell?

BY JUDITH CAPEN



LEFT: Before: Front RIGHT: Facade, After: Rear addition

The GreenSpur house at 19 4th St. NE, recently completed, put on the market, and sold, has generated a lot of buzz. This is a good thing. Anything that packages green in an attention-grabbing way is good. One website commenter called the interior pictures “house porn.” In a good way.

GreenSpur, Inc. is a young firm billing itself as design-build-sustain. Mark Turner, one of the two principals, was kind enough to show me the house recently. While much of the project’s recent exposure has been about DCRA hassles the project’s real story is sustainability. Sustainability all dressed up and ready to party. If seeing this very sexy little house has converted anyone to the Church of Green, Mark and his business partner, Nick Cioffi, will have done good.

A few things occurred to me looking at the project. Except for creating a really well-insulated, tight envelope, everything else they did is doable for the rest of us in our existing houses.

Our appliances get old and stop working. We can replace them with fancy new stainless steel Energy Star ones. A lot of our houses suffer from old replacement windows. You can replace them with double-glazed, argon-filled, low-E Energy Star windows. Our boilers, furnaces, air handlers, and hot water heaters can be replaced with tankless units and even ground-source heat pumps. Changing toilets and adding aerators is easy as is changing

light bulbs to CFLs.

What GreenSpur consistently did was their homework: looking for and finding good products that are high quality, high performing, and green. They also used systems like the ground source/geothermal heat pump system.

I hope this project gets people excited about possibilities of spending money to save energy and money. While the GreenSpur emphasis is sustainability, they are also selling amenities like 8’ plus ceilings throughout and “abundance of natural light:” both good and important.

And all the re-used, re-purposed materials in the house help to ground it.

Of course they did some things I would have done differently and we differ on a few specifics and they succumbed to some just plain silliness (“the outdoor ethanol fireplace and water feature,” come on guys!), but all in all a welcome addition to our neighborhood.

*Caveat: Before calling anyone and asking for a tankless water heater or geothermal or whatever, make sure you and/or your contractor understand usage and loads and match a new appliance to your needs. And, Energy Star everything.

...

Even as I hit “send” last month to submit my article (making fun of WASA’s dry dry bureaucratic alphabet

soup), WASA detonated a water line in front of our house.

Husband and I were attempting to leave on a Friday for NYC and trying to finish a week’s worth of things before going, not to mention getting out of town before the predicted 20” of snow. And there was the sick cat.

As I left the house at the crack of dawn about 10 a.m. to take pictures to send to My Editor with my article I noticed rivulets of water in front of our house. The rivulets were still there when I returned.

Meanwhile, the son, home from his first quarter at college, was up and I told him we seemed to have a leak in the front yard. He peeked out his window and said, “Wow,” more of a reaction than the rivulets deserved, so

I looked too and said “WOW.”

The rivulets had morphed into a series of bubbling fountains from our fence all the way out at the curb. I dialed the WASA emergency phone number, and got a person! Told her of the front yard events, assured her it was bad enough to bother with soon and progressing FAST. She said they’d check it out. Almost minutes later the doorbell rang...but it wasn’t WASA. It was our neighbor telling us about the gush. She suggested we call 311 and we suggested she fill pots and bathtubs as son had so he could proceed with his dinner party that evening.

Son mutters about us leaving him in disaster-land and maybe better cancel the keg: how could it be delivered through the front lake?



The unexpected water feature that appeared in our front yard as we were trying to get out of town. WASA came. And installed hazard tape.

Someone from WASA finally arrived, ran hazard tape, and left.

We did too, leaving son with camera, sick cat, and bathtub of water.

As I read about Combined Sewer Overflows (CSOs) on the WASA website for last month's article, I noticed "Cold Weather Contributes to Water Main Breaks" under News and Alerts. "As the weather turns cold, water main breaks become increasingly more common." I'm still wondering why exactly cold weather is associated with water main breaks.

Thank you WASA for fixing our break and I promise I won't make fun of your alphabet soup bureaucratic-speak ever again.

Q. We had a terrible stink in the bathroom that smelled like a previous experience with a dead mouse so we figured that's what it was and that we just had to wait it out. The smell seemed to abate but it hasn't entirely gone away. What now? - Dead in the Wall

A. I suggest you call your plumber. We had a similar problem at the office. But after the dead mouse smell went away we still had a smell, but more sewer-y. After burning candles (supposed to combust bad odors. It also added a little weird panache to the powder room...) and suggesting the staff avoid beans we left the exhaust fan on over the weekend, all to no avail.

My co-principal, who was called by one of our clients the best forensic architect he knows, couldn't let it go. He kept sniffing and poking around. Finally, he called the plumber and they discovered that the wax ring between the toilet and the floor was broken allowing sewer gas, bypassing the trap in the toilet, to escape into the powder room. After a new wax ring, the smell went away! Who knew a wax ring could fail?

Judith Capen, preservation architect, and woman with issues with high heels, can be reached at Judith.Capen@architravepc.com. ★

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