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A glam, glitzy and green Hillsborough mansion

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Yes, Michael and Lisa Rubenstein realize that if all they wanted in life was to go green, they'd live off the grid in a yurt.

But the couple dreamed of a big house with a big yard where their kids and friends and relatives had plenty of room to play and swim and lounge, all on a single story so that a child in a wheelchair could roam freely and independently.

They longed for adult spaces with sparkling chandeliers easily powered by a solar system, and elegant wall coverings, not off-gassing toxins. They wanted new but not minimalist, green but not alfalfa.

Could they have their granola and eat it too? From the looks of their new, contemporary-on-the-outside, luxe-on-the-inside, 6,000-square-foot Hillsborough home and from the smiles on their faces, the Rubensteins' effort to make the greenest selection at every step of the building process seems to have yielded a harmonious synergy of livability, luxury and environmental responsibility.

"This is the Hillsborough market - you're not going to build less than 6,000 square feet," said Lisa, an interior designer. "So what do you do, throw up your hands and say screw it? You can be green in any market, you just have to find the right materials."

"I actually think the bigger houses have a bigger responsibility in that regard," said the architect, Randy Grange.

"Yes," Lisa said. "Because we can afford it, we should do more."

To make their points heard, the Rubensteins opened their doors to The Chronicle despite concerns from friends and family about their privacy. Leslie Lamarre, who is married to Grange and collaborated with Lisa Rubenstein on the interiors, said the couple encouraged her to get the word out.

"It's great they're so eager to share," she said. "Anyone we've asked, they've welcomed. They want to promote green building and sustainability.

"Many people think green has to be earthy-crunchy," Lamarre added. "This house is a great example of how it's possible to be green *and* glamorous."

Lamarre has a journalism background that includes writing about energy-related issues for a bimonthly electric utility trade magazine, and Grange is LEED accredited by the U.S. Green Building Council. Their firm, TRG, belongs to and has representation on a slew of green organizations and councils.

They were a perfect match for Michael Rubenstein, an idea man who said to his wife on their rainy first date, "Wouldn't it be great if an umbrella popped out of the car when you opened the door?"

"That's Michael, he's always coming up with 'Wouldn't it be great if,' " Lisa said.

As green as possible

Michael set out to build his family's new house in as green a way as possible, and then got carried away.

"It started with solar panels on the roof," he said. "Then as we went along, it got greener and greener, to the point that when we were sourcing, we tried to get everything within 100 miles. We reached a tipping point, after which everything had to be as green as possible."

"You see guys run down by the process," Lamarre said. The Rubensteins "gained momentum. They wanted to get greener and greener."

The couple bought the Hillsborough property in 2004 when they decided it was impractical to try to adapt their two-story San Mateo Park home for wheelchair accessibility. The single-family home on the property was in disrepair, and after demolition only the roof tiles were deemed worthy of reuse.

Grange designed a single-story, east-west-oriented floor plan that was U-shaped to admit lots of natural light through high windows and multiple courtyards, with overhangs for shade during the hotter times of the year. There also would be a guesthouse that, including a basement with wine cellar, workout room and utility spaces, takes the official square footage to approximately 7,400.

Neighbors gave thumbs up, but the town's Architectural and Design Review Board took them to the edge of their seats during the July 2005 vote. While all five board members expressed admiration for Grange's very modern exterior of FSC-certified ipe wood and a stucco-like lime plaster (solar panels atop the master bedroom are out of sight from the street), according to the minutes, two said it did not belong in the otherwise "traditional" neighborhood. It was 2-2 when the tie-breaking

vote came in the Rubensteins' favor.

"Not everyone loves contemporary," said Lisa Rubenstein.

"But this is a soft contemporary," Grange said.

Warm contemporary inside

It's a warm contemporary inside, with reclaimed hardwood floors from Restoration Timber and TerraMai, and with natural and sustainable wall coverings including beaded glass (from Innovations), mother of pearl (from Maya Romanoff) and wood grain (from MDC Wood). An impressive front door of ipe and steel opens into a foyer dominated by a curvy, contemporary chandelier and a mother-of-pearl-covered freestanding wall delineating the formal living room. The living room's seasonal focal points: in summer, sliders opening out to the patio and pool, or in winter, a fireplace powered by denatured alcohol.

Lisa Rubenstein and Lamarre rejected the notion that a green interior is naturally cold or, as Lamarre had said, "crunchy."

"I was so tired of seeing green product that was boring," Lisa said. "Is it so hard to give it a curve?"

What she found: "It's incredible what is going on now at the Design Center. There are many choices." She also bookmarked 1stdibs.com so she could search for domestic antiques, and justified a sectional from Roche-Bobois because it was a floor model.

She saw eyebrows rise quizzically at Michael Taylor when she selected a round dining table design and asked that it be made with FSC-certified wood. (It was.) She and her husband debated the merits of cabinetmakers and chose Moore Than Cabinets of Santa Clara, though it had little green project experience. And they used a builder, Otto Miller, for whom many of the products they chose were unfamiliar.

The one that impressed him most, apparently, was the geothermal system - "He's using it on another house," Michael said. It was Lamarre who had proposed geothermal, which costs in the ballpark of \$180,000 but is said to pay for itself by providing free heating and cooling in partnership with the electricity generated by the photovoltaic system.

There wasn't a residential LEED program at the time the Rubensteins started building, but Grange is working on certification through the state's Build It Green program. According to official calculations, the architect said, "We are 41 1/2 percent better than required energy efficiency."

Green and accessible

Building green added perhaps 10 percent in costs, Michael Rubenstein estimated. (He declined to

disclose the price of the project.)

"Some things cost more, others less," he said.

Building the house to be wheelchair-friendly added next to nothing to the price, except that it requires a larger lot to build one story than two. Wide halls, large doors and zero thresholds, Lamarre noted, are features that many clients want today, and grab bars are not expensive.

She and Lisa chose bright green handles made of 3-Form scraps for the 30-inch-high vanity and installed bright green tile above the marble to make an accessible bathroom enticing for a child who, his mother says, is thrilled that he can now pull himself up to stand and see himself in the tilting mirror when he brushes his teeth.

The couple's own white bathroom features a green invention of Michael Rubenstein's, a "passively heated towel warmer." It's a compartment installed in the shower where a towel could be warmed during a hot shower.

In theory, that is. In the month since the family moved in, Rubinstein has found it to be not so practical. There are a few other flaws they've discovered, he said, but overall, "this has been so much fun! And it's all energy free. Except for the cooktop, and the husband won't use that."

Ah yes, the cooktop, the one area where the couple clashed. Lisa got Michael's nod on glittering chandeliers and sparkling wall coverings, but Michael could not bring Lisa on board for a magnetic induction cooktop. She chose a 48-inch Viking gas top with electric oven.

"For me, it was about the flame," she said. "I just could not be an early adopter."

That was *the* exception to the house rule.

Green menu

The Rubensteins were unconstrained by space or budget as they chose systems and features for their new home. They made their choices based on their environmental concerns and their design aesthetics. But there are items big and small on this list that might be worth considering for your remodel.

Efficient design: Making generous use of natural light and creating cross-ventilation possibilities reduce the need for electricity.

Geothermal heat pump system: Using the earth's stable temperatures underground to help cool the house in summer, heat it in winter. This system - supplied by 88 HVAC (www.88hvac.com) - also powers radiant flooring in some areas of the house.

Photovoltaic system: Solar panels can virtually eliminate electricity bills.

Graywater system: Water filtered from washers, sinks and showers can be used for irrigation.

Framing, plywood, cabinetry, paneling, siding and doors certified by the Forest Stewardship Council: All FSC-certified wood comes from responsibly managed forests.

Reclaimed wood floors: These save trees by putting old wood and waste wood to good use.

Energy-efficient windows: These help keep a house cooler in summer, warmer in winter.

Eco-friendly paints and water-based stains: They reduce air toxins.

Ultratouch insulation: Made of recycled denim, it does not contain toxins and irritants.

Fly ash substituted for cement in foundation and floors: Saves energy and reduces carbon dioxide emissions by half.

Lime plaster substituted for stucco on exterior: It uses a quarter of the energy needed for concrete and while emitting only a fraction of the carbon dioxide, it also reabsorbs it.

Countertops of Richlite, PaperStone, CaesarStone: The first is tree pulp from managed forests, PaperStone is made of recycled paper, and the last has high standards for manufacturing.

Dual-flush toilets: They allow water use according to need.

Eco-friendly furniture: For the Rubensteins, this includes antiques and reuse such as mah-jongg tiles for cabinet hardware, a vintage pool table in the game room, and a floor-model sectional sofa in front of the EcoSmart fireplace (fueled by denatured alcohol).

For specific product vendor names and contact information, e-mail the architect and designer at info@trgarch.com.

- Susan Fornoff

Resources

-- **Architect:** Randy Grange, TRG Architects, (650) 579-5762, www.trgarch.com.

-- **Builder:** Otto Miller, Miller Development, (650) 340-8112, www.ottomiller.com.

-- **Green building support:** The Green Building Exchange, 305 Main St., Redwood City. (650) 369-4900, www.greenbuildingexchange.com.

-- **Tour:** The house is one of 15 selected for the Build It Green home tour Sept. 28, in conjunction

with the West Coast Green conference and expo in San Jose. (510) 845-0472,
www.BuildItGreen.org.

E-mail Susan Fornoff at sfornoff@sfgate.com.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2008/07/02/HOP5119FUN.DTL>

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