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Art Elliott: Art and the science of building

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Art Elliott was green before green was cool. The owner/president of Shelter Associates has been building homes for nearly four decades, and was among the first to embrace the concepts of energy efficiency that are now popularly known by the most prevalent color in nature.

Elliott went to work for Sears after graduating from college, earning rapid promotions in the Midwest territory before being transferred to the South. He did not like the thought of uprooting his family frequently, so he returned to Michigan to assemble modular homes.

"None of the factories we worked with controlled their quality well enough to meet the standards we had. Then we started building them one at a time. I left Michigan, and we arrived in Coeur d'Alene the year after Mt. St. Helens."

Is that when you started Shelter Associates?

No. The idea I originally came here for I built a house for a fellow and his wife that had a mini-blind fabricating company we were going to open a fabricating shop where these were actually built and sell them to retailers. But when I got here and realized how big that territory was going to be, and to make it successful I would have had to go halfway to Seattle, and halfway across Montana, and the reason we had moved was to be able to spend more time at home and not do all that moving around.

After a couple of years I started building here, got involved with the building association again, because we've always felt we should give back to the community and the industry we work in.

Were you always focused on the green angle?

We were always focused on energy conservation. One of the first programs was the Good Sense program, not the Super Good Sense program, back when Gov. Evans was in charge, in office, and the first year of the program we built 30 percent of the homes in Idaho that met the Good Sense standards. That's not as dramatic as it sounds there were only six. There wasn't very much interest.

Why was it that energy conservation was important to you?

I think the reason is, because when you expand attention to energy, it means you're building the house right, and because you understand the principles of building science — and I'm continuing to learn those all the time — those principles have been there forever, and I'm really glad to see today so many builders talking about being green.

And there are many shades of green, of course, there are different levels how green you want to be. But as it becomes more and more mainstream it will be more than lip service. For a long time in northern Idaho clients thought they were building an energy-efficient house if they had two-by-six walls. That's just the beginning of what truly makes a house green. The word green we use because it's so readily identified, but what it really is is a high-performance home, a home that's built to the principles of building science.

Do you use materials that are particularly efficient or unusual?

We upgrade the insulation in the walls to R-21 dry cellulose which reduces the amount of air infiltration and raises the R value. We like to wrap the house in a blanket with an insulated sheathing on the outside. I'm not able to sell that to every client.

What you do I'm a little bit old-fashioned in structural you can instead of using the plywood sheathing on the outside you can put on corner bracing and add insulated sheathing directly to the outside. So I'm a little old-fashioned in liking the strength you get in an OSB board, an oriented strand board, or plywood even though it's beyond code.

The attention to detail and making sure you're controlling the air infiltration instead of just letting it leak in and leak out is what's really important, and applying those same principles of building science is what lets you do that.

What is the most unique or unusual material you have ever used?

I built a straw-bale house, just an incredible wonderful house. When I built it I tried to talk her out of it. I told her I could build it more energy efficient using conventional methods. After I got done I apologized.

She has a little truth window set in it that's clear glass, so you can see the straw bale behind.

Like a giant peephole!

Like a giant peephole, exactly. There are moisture meters in the wall so you can see there's never been any moisture build up in it. Very easy to heat, very balanced heat.

There must be some construction challenges to it, with the walls so thick.

The stucco guys were there forever. They had their initials here and there. It's a tradition they leave a quarter, each of them, somewhere in the stucco inside.

It's a post and beam construction. You can build with straw bales as a structural element. The way we built it, the way most people build it, is it's got a timber frame then you infill with straw bales.

The feel of that house is just wonderful when you walk into it.

When it was time to do the straw bales there was a guild that came and helped her, then we did all the finishing details, which were the tough things.

They were volunteers that went from site to site. It

ART ELLIOTT owner/president of Shelter Associates helped the cost.

Do you see more of that happening?

To me it's more practical in a dry climate, it would there have been a few built in be easier to finish off, but

Washington and Idaho.

Are there any new techniques coming that look promising?

Our industry is slow to change. We've been building with two-by-fours and two-by-sixes for centuries now. They tried to introduce steel studs. There's no insulation value in steel studs. The cold just passes through, the heat just slips through it. Structurally integrated panels have been around a long time they are incredibly efficient and incredibly quiet, but unless you're doing a bunch of them, they're not as cost effective because the crews aren't used to doing them, so there is a learning curve.

How many employees do you have?

Most of our work we use trade contractors, we use partners. We have eight full-time employees.

Have you seen a steady evolution of technique and knowledge among the contractors?

In the past week we provided them with a video that demonstrates how each part of implementing the principles of building science and integrating the house as a structure goes into it.

I think there's going to be with the energy crisis that we are in again we've always believed it makes sense to develop the village concept. Coeur d'Alene Place is getting close to doing that, but it's very rare that you could get on your bike from there and get to work. It would be nice if there was a piece of land where that could be done.

That's what people want to do with (Tullamore) that just broke ground on (Highway) 41, but it's going to be a while.

I would love to find a piece of infill land that we could do cottages on.

How many of your own homes have you built?

In my first wifetime, we built a lot for ourselves, because Sherry liked the idea. Trudy and I have not built a house together.

I live in Skip Murphy's house (In Kidd Island), that we bought because of the view. If you're at Beverly's (restaurant in The Coeur d'Alene Resort) we're right across the lake.

You're selling it. Are you downsizing?

We don't need that kind of There are two of us. We have blended families. We each have three children. Now between us have 7 grandchildren, and they all live here.

All my kids, all her kids, and all our grandchildren are right here, which is really nice. We'd be really happy in about 2,100 square feet, 2,200 square feet.

Do you have any children following you into the business?

No. My son-in-law worked with us for a while. My daughter has worked with us off and on. But no, no family involvement.

When do you plan to retire?

I can't draw Social Security until I turn 66, which is another year, so we have to get through this market and make sure we have people here that can carry on. I have some people here that can continue this. Within a couple of years I would not be actively involved in day-today operations.

Art Elliott, owner/president of Shelter Associates.

Info box

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