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# natural HOME

Special Focus:  
Kitchens & Baths

2006  
KITCHEN OF THE YEAR

**SAFELY  
RENOVATING  
AN OLDER HOME**

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**ALLERGY-PROOF  
YOUR HOME  
ON A BUDGET**

Designed around a large, people-friendly kitchen area, this passive solar home in Asheville, North Carolina, really shines.

# A Sociable Home

South-facing floor-to-ceiling living room windows bring daylight deep into the house and blur the distinction between outside and in. Flowers planted at the base of the windows can be enjoyed from the comfort of indoors.



The kitchen counter extension serves as a desk or as a small table for a quick meal. The rack above the sink lets dishes dry naturally and provides handy access.



The outside entranceway stone wall extends into the living room and becomes part of the fireplace setting for the wood-burning stove. The chimney flue rises up through Mary Ann's upstairs office and provides additional warmth to her space.

Of all of the fond memories of his childhood home, designed and built by his architect dad, Chris Larson remembers the kitchen area the most. "The informal-style dining room table was not quite in the kitchen, nor entirely out of it either," he says. "Near the table were a love seat and a comfy overstuffed chair. And no matter how nice the rest of the house was, most activity took place in that kitchen and the hang-out zone near it."

Chris built a home for his own family (wife Mary Ann Watjen and daughter Haley) in Asheville, North Carolina, that suggests he inherited his dad's design sense. For his own home, Chris, who also is an architect, had free reign to play with his two guiding principles—"sociable architecture" and natural forms—when designing the cozy 2,700-square-foot, four-bedroom, three-and-a-half bath passive solar home.

### The sociable kitchen

Throughout his career, Chris has been intrigued by the home kitchen's gravitational pull. "People would leave the comfortable living room sofa and opt for standing and talking in the kitchen," he says. "So if folks are that determined to hang out there, I decided to

MARGARET MARCHUK  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY GIL STOSE

focus on how the kitchen could be designed to enhance comfort.”

The Larsons’ “sociable kitchen” is a triangle that includes the kitchen, dining room and living room area, without dividing walls. “This allows space, view and light to flow freely,” Chris says. “Instead of looking out a window over a kitchen sink, we look across open space to windows and the view beyond. Even while cooking in the kitchen, we can still observe and feel we are part of the outside. We can see across the living area to the fireplace that adds to the warmth of the kitchen.”

At one end of the range and sink islands, an open space accommodates a small table that seats three or four. This serves as a convenient place for quick meals or for Haley to do homework (with help from whichever parent is cooking). Attached to the backside of the two islands, storage shelves create a “kitchen” feeling, keep everyday utensils handy and provide a screen that distinguishes the kitchen from the living room area.

A small sofa adjacent to the table allows guests to get comfortable and carry on conversation, yet be out of the way while the Larsons cook. “This kitchen was designed to promote that intimate social interaction,” Chris says.

To build the islands, cabinetry and shelves in the kitchen, Chris located recycled wood—oak, chestnut oak and heart pine—from 100-year-old barns a local cabinetmaker tore down. Chris also was able to save money on the granite countertops by buying slabs left over from larger jobs.

The patio off the kitchen is convenient for *al fresco* dining and adds to the living and socializing space. The gentle sound of Whisper Creek wandering through a quarter of woodland adds to the relaxing ambiance.

### Heating and cooling naturally

The home’s backside and carport are bermed 8 feet deep into a south-facing slope. This way, “the house becomes an extension of the landscape, growing from what’s already there, rather than imposing upon it,” Chris says. Berming the living area into the earth also contributes to the home’s energy efficiency.

At the front of the house, south-facing floor-to-ceiling windows in the living room and kitchen bring daylight deep inside. In



Leftover cutoffs from the rafter tails were utilized as diagonals for the stair steps. A river birch branch was selected for the handrail because the diameter of the branch stays relatively the same throughout its length. A cherry tree that had to be cut down on the property was put to use as the stair spindles.



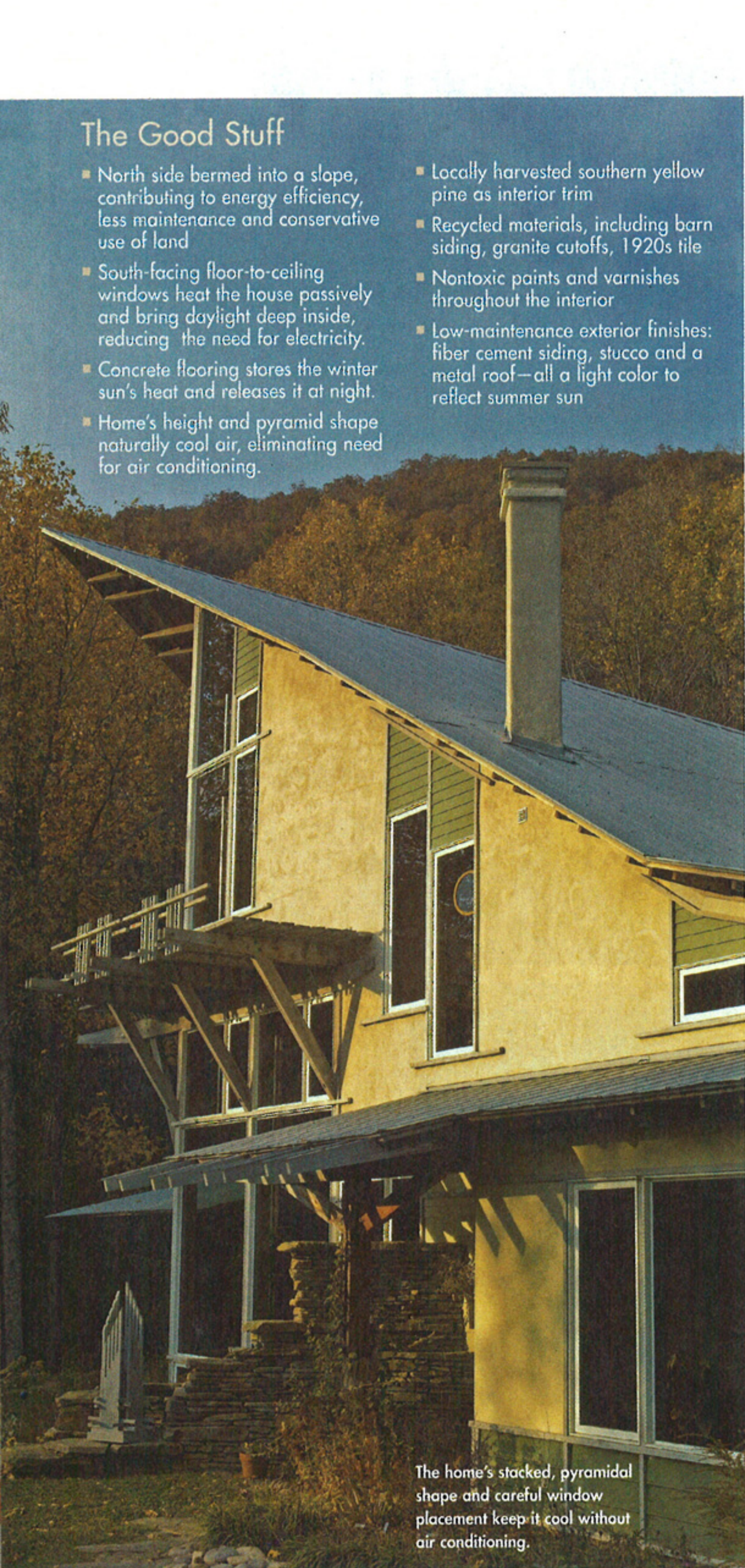
The kitchen door leads to an outdoor patio that extends the dining and social area.



Two bedroom walls of expansive glass showcase the woodlands, allowing the Larsons to awaken to the sights of nature around them. The southern yellow pine ceiling joists create a canopy over the bed and closet and allow air to circulate.

## The Good Stuff

- North side bermed into a slope, contributing to energy efficiency, less maintenance and conservative use of land
- South-facing floor-to-ceiling windows heat the house passively and bring daylight deep inside, reducing the need for electricity.
- Concrete flooring stores the winter sun's heat and releases it at night.
- Home's height and pyramid shape naturally cool air, eliminating need for air conditioning.
- Locally harvested southern yellow pine as interior trim
- Recycled materials, including barn siding, granite cutoffs, 1920s tile
- Nontoxic paints and varnishes throughout the interior
- Low-maintenance exterior finishes: fiber cement siding, stucco and a metal roof—all a light color to reflect summer sun



The home's stacked, pyramidal shape and careful window placement keep it cool without air conditioning.

addition to the solar benefit, the large expanse of windows blurs the distinction between inside and out. The flower gardens planted at the base of the windows become a part of the living room area.

The second-floor wooden deck shields the sun's light in summer, yet allows maximum winter sun to enter the home. Interior windows placed between rooms allow the winter sun's heat to flow throughout the house. A concrete floor stores heat then releases it during the night, and conceals tubing for radiant baseboard heat.

Rather than paying more for finished tile flooring, Chris chose to finish a less-expensive concrete floor himself. "Because I had never scored or stained concrete, it was a learning process that took time and patience," Chris says. "I experimented for two days to achieve the effect I wanted before I applied it to the entire floor. That process took another two weeks." While happy with his results, he cautions beginners to start in an area where mistakes may not be noticeable. "I began in the laundry room, and by the time I got to the living room, I was a pro."

The home's strategically placed windows—35 feet from the highest to the lowest—cool the house naturally, pushing hot air out at the top and pulling cool air in at the bottom, without air conditioning. Ventilation fans on programmable switches and passive air inlets in strategic locations keep moisture levels low.

### Living design lessons

The Larson home cost \$130 per square foot to build in 2001; Chris estimates the same project would easily cost \$175 to \$200 per square foot today. While their home has \$20,000 worth of windows, Chris and Mary Ann regret they had to scale back \$75,000 worth of glass to work within their budget.

In addition to providing a great place to live, the home is an educational tool that helps Chris explain passive-solar and sociable-kitchen concepts to his clients. "A number of my clients have incorporated these ideas, to varying degrees, into their home plans," he says. "Folks come here and get a direct sense of how a home 'feels' when it's designed following the principles that guide me." **NH**

TO FIND ITEMS USED IN THIS HOUSE, SEE PAGE 95.