

It is easy being green

Just ask Erin O'Brien, owner of Erin Designs, who thrives on thinking locally and globally.

By Patricia Bates McGhee

Little did Erin O'Brien know that the Girl Scout pledge to "make the world a better place" would help her create her own career niche as a globally thinking, "green" interior design consultant.

"Being responsible to the bioenvironment was born and ingrained in me — it's always been there," said O'Brien, owner and a managing member of Erin Designs, LLC in Eau Claire.

"My father attained Eagle Scout rank in the Boy Scouts, my parents took me camping from the time I was a baby and I'm a lifetime Girl Scout — I grew up going through the Girl Scouts, attended Scout camps and served as a camp counselor," she said.

Add to the mix a Bachelor of Science degree in art — that incorporated environmental design into the basics of art — from the University of Wisconsin-Stout in Menomonie, working for Ethan Allen for a few years and Ferings Interiors for about eight years and starting Erin Designs in 1991.

It's no wonder O'Brien is committed to making a difference through interior design projects that can improve not only her clients' living environments and health but also protect our planet and keep it green.

"I enjoy helping others think both locally and globally which, in the long run, can save them money and may even protect their health," she said.

"I advise clients to aim for the best-quality products they can afford because these products will wear longer, which means they'll save money over the lifetime of the products because they won't need to replace

them as often," O'Brien added.

"Plus that pays off for all of us in the long run because less trash ends up in our landfills," she explained. "Plus, lower-quality paints and carpeting may release unhealthy chemicals in the home — and eventually in our landfills."

Thinking globally when remodeling and decorating doesn't cost that much more either, according to O'Brien.

"Because more and more of our population is demanding products that are more eco-friendly and more sustainable, companies are developing more 'green' products for the home — it's a matter of supply and demand," she said.

O'Brien says many people have the perception that green buildings, though more attractive from an environmental and health perspective, are substantially more costly than conventional design and therefore may not be justified from a cost perspective.

"This perception has been the single largest obstacle to adopting the green design," she said. "In fact, when determining the cost of building 'green' compared to conventional design, the average premium for these buildings is slightly less than 2 percent — or \$3 to \$5 per foot — substantially lower than is commonly perceived.

"The majority of this cost is due to the increased architectural and engineering design time and the time required to integrate sustainable building practices into projects," O'Brien said. "Generally, the earlier 'green' building features are incorporated into the design process, the lower the cost."



Contributed photo

The eco-friendly sustainable practices chosen for this home on Lake Owen in Menomonie includes hiring local contractors and artisans and installing Silestone countertops (quartz chips made from granite waste products), Forest Stewardship Council-certified wood, locally grown beams and timber, quality Energy Star appliances, energy-efficient lighting and in-floor radiant heat. The owners are clients of Erin O'Brien.

Once clients are made aware of what their choices are, they get interested. O'Brien works one-on-one with them to develop an overview for their 'green' remodeling and decorating projects.

She meets with them in their homes or at her studio in downtown Eau Claire and gathers information by conducting energy audits, discussing budgets and identifying both short- and long-term goals. Projects can be completed all at once or in stages. And for projects in older homes, O'Brien says a multi-year "green" plan may work best for a client's budget and schedule.

"An energy overview or audit can tell us a lot about how best to remodel an older home and how to prioritize projects — and in how many steps and in what time frame," O'Brien said. For example, if the audit identifies a crumbling foundation or windows that frost up and bleed onto woodwork, she'd suggest addressing these problems first.

Home Tours

What: Urban Living Tour, presented by Downtown Eau Claire, Inc.

When: 11 a.m.-4 p.m. Saturday, June 12.

Where: Throughout downtown Eau Claire.

Tickets: \$5, available at the DECI booth at the Open Air Festival of the Arts in Phoenix Park.

Information: <http://www.downtown-eauclaire.com/get-involved/loft-apartment-committee/>

"That may mean getting the roof and foundation fixed and then, maybe two years later, we'd be ready for new carpet and hardwood floors. "Then we could decide what to do next," she said. "For older homes — which often have many things to upgrade — it's critical to first develop a plan and then prioritize the steps."

O'Brien also is quick to advise clients that not everything in their older homes has to be remodeled. "If there's nothing physically wrong with that 1950s pink bathroom with the cemented-in bathtub, let's move on to a 'green' cork floor," she said. "Or let's replace that old dust mite- and dirt-infested carpet that emits unhealthy chemicals with a non-porous hardwood."

If you want facts and figures on how much energy-wasting materials cost homeowners, O'Brien has them.

"No matter how new or old your home is — or from what time period — you need to look at the air filtration throughout the actual structure," she said.

"If an audit shows it has poor or no insulation, or bad windows or zinc or lead pipes, there's a good chance these materials have crumbled and now threaten the foundation," O'Brien said.

A home energy audit in older homes also can reveal electrical wiring that is not to code or substandard insulation. O'Brien also helps clients properly dispose of these items.

"I ask clients where they're going to discard those old materials and offer to make arrangements for a service that can make sure the materials — especially asbestos — are contained, disposed of properly, taken off site and delivered to salvage vendors," she said.

Creating eco-friendly interior designs for clients is O'Brien's passion. In just one meeting or conversation, her enthusiasm takes over.

"There is only one beautiful blue-green planet Earth," she said. "Through my sustainable interior design business, I want to continue to share what I learn about sustainable, eco-friendly business and design practices.

"When a client chooses to implement 'green' building solutions, they are taking a small, but very important step to help preserve the world we live in now and the future," she explains. "Breathing clean indoor air and using less energy and water are ways to save the planet and save money as well as create a healthy, beautiful place to work or live."

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How to Start a "Green Design"

Ask yourself before throwing away: Could someone else need or use this?

Purchase quality, long-lasting, durable products and appliances.

Look for recycled or sustainable content products.

Buy locally. Support local trades people and service providers.

Consider antiques, re-upholstered furniture or repurposed items. Salvaged goods reduce the burden on landfills.

Use lighting and natural light more efficiently. Turn lights off when you are not using them.

Use compact fluorescent bulbs or LED, add dimmer switches to incandescent bulbs or install light/sun tubes when possible.

Use low or no VOC (Volatile Organic Compounds) paints and finishes.

Turn off and/or unplug appliances, cell phone adaptors and computers — all are phantom energy eaters — when not in use.

Use Earth-friendly, non-toxic cleaning products.

Bring fresh air into your home or business.

Contribute to groups that plant trees or invest in renewable energy.

Get involved in sustainable eco-friendly community projects.

Erin's Picks for Green Resources

www.regreenprogram.org — Guidelines for remodeling your home.

www.wgba.org — The Wisconsin Green Building Alliance's (WGBA) mission is to facilitate and promote the development and use of ecologically sustainable materials.

www.focusonenergy.com — Focus on Energy works with eligible Wisconsin residents and businesses to install cost-effective energy efficiency and renewable energy projects.

www.energystar.gov — ENERGY STAR is a government-backed program helping businesses and individuals protect the environment through superior energy efficiency.

www.storyofstuff.com — A video clip of how we extract, produce, distribute, consume and dispose of our stuff... and to learn there is another way to do this.

www.epa.gov/watersense — WaterSense, a partnership program sponsored by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, makes it easy for Americans to save water and protect the environment.

www.smartgrowth.org — This Is Smart Growth describes how, when done well, development can help create more economic opportunities, build great places where people want to live and visit, preserve the qualities people love about their communities, and protect environmental resources.

www.naturalbuilthome.com — Minnesota eco-friendly building, lighting, painting and cleaning products and supplies

www.buildinggreen.com — Learn about green building and design strategies.

www.architecture2030.org — Meeting the 2030 Challenge through building codes.

www.newurbannews.com/AboutNewUrbanism.html — A new way to look at the old neighborhood concept.

www.mcdonough.com/cradle_to_cradle.htm — Remaking the way we make things.

www.greenblue.org — Transforming the way we conceive design.

www.ecolect.net — More eco-friendly materials.

eartheasy.com/live_nontoxic_solutions.htm — Natural, non-toxic cleaning solutions.

www.usgbc.org — The U.S. Green Building Council is a non-profit community of leaders working to make green buildings available to everyone within a generation.

www.fscus.org — Forest Stewardship Council is a non-profit organization devoted to encouraging the responsible management of the world's forests.

www.greenguard.org — Standard for all indoor air environments

www.greenhomeguide.com — Online magazine

ecolabelling.org — An ecolabel is a logo that identifies a product or company that has met an environmentally preferable standard.

www.paperstoneproducts.com — PaperStone is a solid surface using 100% post-consumer recycled paper.