

Green

Dream House

in the City

By Worldchanging NYC local blogger,
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hat do these buildings have in common?

- The Hearst Tower
- The Solaire
- The Bronx Library Center

They are among the first “green” buildings in New York City. If you are interested in green architecture, you are among those who can identify with them

Because of the information these projects have generated about the benefits of green design-energy efficiency, non-toxic materials, lower operating costs, and so on—as well as examples of successful energy-efficient suburban projects, many NYC homeowners want to build green on a small scale.

Two magazines, **Natural Home** and **Dwell**, are each providing coverage of small green residential projects in construction now. The magazines are using their websites to follow the construction process from start to finish. Each narrative provides valuable information about how to build green in urban areas. Robyn Griggs Lawrence, editor-in-chief of Natural Home, always envisioned the Natural Home website as a teaching tool because, “the advent of the web is great for showing actual construction work, as opposed to pretty pictures...we can show all aspects of a project, not just focus on materials or systems.”

When reviewed together, the blogs provide excellent technical detail about various sustainable approaches to architecture, and a good sense of what it feels like to take on a green renovation. As is typical for New York City, both projects are gut renovations of existing buildings rather than new structures. Natural Home Magazine’s Green Show House is a two-unit development in Boerum Hill, while the Dwell project is a townhouse in Harlem.

The Natural Home blog is a straightforward document based on photographs of construction as it progresses, with accompanying text describing how each design choice was made, from foundations to finish materials. Natural Home's project was initiated by the development company R & E Brooklyn, Inc. Two three-bedroom units with garages were designed to rise up out of a corner building that was built in 1920. Architect Tony Daniels stacked the spaces so that there are planted balconies on the top two floors. Energy- efficiency and high air quality were priorities for this project. Part of the drama of the Natural Home project will be watching the installation of a compact solar panel system that can provide all the units' electricity and hot water, and support an innovative solar/gas hybrid system that does the heating and cooling. This project will also be the first American Lung Association "Health House" in the City. Details about building guidelines for this new certification program are here.

The Natural Home blog is an excellent technical resource, but the Dwell site exposes the emotional experience of the building process from a client's perspective. Video episodes document not only the construction process but the voices of the clients (a married couple who are green enthusiasts on a tight budget), the architect (Hannah Purdy), and the construction company (Green Street Construction). Interviews with each of them show green building to be a less risky process (both financially and practically) than one might assume.

The focus of the Dwell project is on making a place that feels like home in a very specific sense. It is like any architectural undertaking in that way. A common refrain on both blogs is that building green in the city requires a willingness to learn as the project unfolds.

The fact that the green issues are negotiated like the details of a typical project provides reassurance that green projects are just as doable as building in the standard way. Perhaps the key message implicit in both blogs is that the dedication of all the collaborators provides the support to follow through on green ideals.



Health House



Health House under renovation

