



August 11, 2008

Local architect advocates for green building

*By Patrick Thornton
Journal Staff*

Tom Brown is a self-professed maverick of the architecture community in Stevens Point and Wisconsin.

Long before words such as "green" and "eco-friendly" were entrenched in the pop culture lexicon, Brown was at the forefront, pushing the envelope of sustainable building design and construction.

Quite simply, Brown, 57, won't design a building if environmentally conscientious principles aren't at the core of the project.

"I guess I've been a voice in the wilderness for the last 20 years," he said. "People are just starting to realize what we have been saying all along is true, and now businesses are seeing they can lose money if they don't design the right way. I do what I do because it's morally right, it's smart and it's good business."

Architecture was Brown's career path at an early age; the path led to Catholic University in Washington, D.C., before he moved to Stevens Point with his wife, Jo Seiser. The couple has two children.

"I was always doodling when I was younger," he said.

He was one of the founding members of the Point Energy Resource Council, the group that spawned the Midwest Renewable Energy Association, and the Wisconsin Green Building Alliance. He also taught at Mid-State Technical college and is now a part-time professor at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point.

Initially Brown took "any job that came in the door," but he matured to specialize in restoring historic buildings and designing new ones. His work has garnered awards from the National Association of Home Builders Research Center, and the visitors center he designed at the Mead Wildlife Area was recognized as one of the greenest in the state.

He said each project takes about two years from start to finish. He starts with a simple premise: Build each building tight, place it facing the right direction and use the right material. And "insulate the hell out of it."

"I tell my clients to focus on first things first," he said. "Let the sun in (during) the winter, and keep it out in the summer. You don't do things out of ignorance. Putting a garage on the south side of a house in this part of the country is not a wise decision."

Kathy Powell, the education and program specialist for the Recycling Connections Corporation in Portage County, hired Brown to design her home.

"(Tom) is not willing to get a job just to do one. It needs to be good and something he believes in," Powell said. "He lives by his core principles."

Brown said his business has picked up in recent years, but he turns down more jobs than he accepts. Building companies and businesses have come around, but for most of his career people were building wrong.

"Our thinking is so shortsighted. If something doesn't pay for itself in a year or two, we say 'it's not worth it,' " he said. "But when you are building a new building, energy conservation is where your money is best spent.

"There is no perfect green material, and the greenest thing to do is not to build in the first place. But we do build, and we need to be smart."
