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Sage advice

Local green architects want clients to feel *good*

By [Sena Christian](#)

Close your eyes. Wherever you are, imagine where you wish you were instead. Maybe you see yourself sitting beneath a willow tree in a park or on a jagged rock, gazing out across the rippling waves of the Pacific Ocean, wishing you weren't so afraid of bodysurfing or getting your leg gnawed off by a shark. This makes you pretty normal for an Earthling (maybe not the bodysurfing part).

In the 1980s, a famous insect guy labeled this supposed innate attraction to other living organisms "biophilia." I call the condition "nature lovers," because I find it less psychologically weird-sounding. Most of us, though, don't spend our lives in the places we want to be. Instead, Americans spend 90 percent of our time indoors.

Green architects Paul Almond and Pam Whitehead want this to change. As the founders of Sacramento-based Sage Architecture Inc., the married couple designs houses based on how clients want to *feel*, as well as functionality. They built a home for an El Dorado man who requested simply that when he stepped through his front door, he entered another world.

"Our clients want the experience of living," Whitehead explained. "Not the space."

The couple distinguishes minimally between indoors and outdoors, crafting houses to coexist with nature—lots of big windows and open space, welcoming sunlight and views. They use recycled and durable products that will stand the test of time and incorporate cool roofs to reduce energy use. Modern architectural principles govern the couple's designs as they find the style most suited to eco-friendly building.

With only 2 percent of U.S. houses designed by architects, Almond and Whitehead are a rarity, which isn't to say they're exclusive. Clients range from young families to retirees downsizing to self-made millionaires. The couple has worked on projects in Reno, Nev.; Davis; Napa; the Bay Area; and as far east as Martha's Vineyard, typically overseeing up to 10 projects at a time. Basically, hubby accepts projects until wifey "slaps him upside the head," Whitehead joked.



SN&R buys a building, wants to make it green and pays Sena: Eco-Warrior Princess to write a weekly column about it.

The couple met as students at the University of Minnesota and headed to Southern California for better weather, then to Sacramento for better jobs. In April 2001, they started their business out of their Curtis Park house but have since relocated to a small, humble office in a nondescript building off Broadway.

Their first project was a 1,200-square-foot house on 230 acres in Camino, Calif. The clients—an outdoorsy family—didn't need much space, so the architects designed the house 12 feet wide and 48 feet long, shaping it to the site by cushioning the structure among surrounding trees. A staircase ascended the west side to provide shade from the summer sun and concrete walls created a thermal energy storage system. Almond and Whitehead didn't even put in an air-conditioning unit. They designed the house to promote passive solar energy—a tenet of green building, in which a structure's orientation and solar angles exploit a region's temperate climate to achieve energy efficiency through nonmechanical methods.

“We hear about [green] technology and materials, but people ignore the architecture and shaping of the building,” Almond said. “Passive solar design is not a dressing or a decoration. It's inherent in the building.”

However, there may be something even more inherent to how a house takes shape.

“The first thing is really recognizing how much space you need,” Whitehead said.

The couple asks clients to evaluate actual needs—does your family *really* need four bathrooms and a three-car garage?—and build accordingly. During college, Almond studied under the renowned Sarah Susanka, author of the best-selling *The Not So Big House* and proponent of the bigger-does-not-equal-better mentality: a core belief in the green-building movement.

Overbuilding wastes resources and materials. Yet, the average American house size has doubled since World War II, taking off in the past decade as low mortgage rates and a fruitful housing market upped McMansions' desirability quotient. The National Association of Home Builders estimates that 42 percent of newly built houses now have more than 2,400 square feet, compared with only 10 percent in 1970.

Almond and Whitehead aren't fond of steroid-injected houses. When one client wanted 3,500 square feet, the couple effectively downsized plans to 2,200. They designed a 900-square-foot house in Lake Tahoe. In one county, they struggled to obtain approval for a small house because the jurisdiction had a minimum size requirement for residential.

“Hello! We're trying to be green here!” Almond said, laughing at the memory. The couple typically turns down large-scale projects because “It doesn't feel right.”

Houses should feel comfortable and pleasant, not wasteful and *wrong*.

Ah, to spend our days in places we truly enjoy. How nice. If only closing our eyes would get us there.