



## this gold house

A Skaneateles home sets the gold standard for environmentally friendly houses in New York State. And it has a really cool toilet. *by Miyoko Ohtake*

THIS HOUSE BEGINS — like all conventional homes — at the front door. But inside the vestibule hangs a striking red Fender guitar signed by Sir Paul McCartney. Framed in oak, it hangs at an angle on the “art wall.” Elet Callahan rolls her eyes at the idea of needing an art wall, but loves the signed guitar and its prime location.

The Callahans — Elet, a 50-year-old Syracuse University law and public policy professor at the Martin J. Whitman School of Management, John, a 52-year-old orthodontist, and their son, Michael, a 19-year-old mechanical engineering student at the Rochester Institute of Technology — are finally moving into their new house on Skaneateles

Lake. It's a 2,500 square-foot, arts-and-crafts-style beauty, and the first and only house in New York to receive the U.S. Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design for Homes gold rating, making it the most environmentally friendly house in the state.

The house's combined splendor and energy efficiency are the result of many long hours of hard work put in by Callahan's builder, Kevin Stack, president of Northeast

Natural Homes. Callahan asked Stack to join her team after she researched local green builders and his name kept popping up.

Stack graduated with dual degrees in biology from Syracuse University and in forestry from the State University of New York College of Environmental Science

and Forestry in 1979 and says he has been “fighting the battle for a sustainably built environment” ever since. “If people truly understood the environmental impact of a kilowatt-hour of electricity, I think they would view it a lot differently than whether it's costing 12 or 14 cents,” he says,

in his naturally lit Syracuse office. The only light comes from a long, narrow window. The overhead lights are off to conserve energy. “People have no concept of the environmental impact,” he says.

An architect in Ithaca referred Callahan to Andrew Ramsgard, founder of Ramsgard Architectural Designs. It was instant attraction when they met. “It took about a minute and a half after we had started talking to realize

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we had found each other," she remembers. Ramsgard, a graduate of the University at Buffalo master's of architecture program, designs homes with the 7th Generation Ethic in mind. "We build not for us, not for the next people, not for the people after that, not for the people after that, or after that," Ramsgard says. "And once you get into that mindset, you're talking about permanent buildings, permanent solutions."

The kitchen is a perfect example of green construction. The cherry wood-paneled fridge has a natural linseed oil finish, and the natural stone counters can be cleaned with just hot water. Non-toxic, low-volatile organic compound paint covers the walls and ceilings. Yet the house is stunning enough that it could easily be featured in *Better Homes and Gardens* with no one knowing about the eco-friendly treatments, or that the house uses about 60 percent less energy than a traditional home.

Looking out onto the lake, which is a stone's throw

from the patio, Callahan says the inspiration to build a green house was the family's "environmental commitment." She laughs remembering what neophytes they were at the outset of construction. "We were going to have solar panels," she remembers. Builder Kevin Stack ran around the lot with a photo voltaic panel attached to a stake to see where it would be cost effective to use solar energy — the answer was nowhere. Callahan learned there was more to being green than meets the eye.

One thing Callahan learned is that building green doesn't have to break the bank. "The things you do to be green save money and then you have extra money to spend on other things that are more expensive," Callahan says. For example, instead of having wood delivered and cutting it to size on-site, Callahan ordered wood cut in the exact dimensions needed. Although ordering specific sizes costs more, the builders only had to purchase the exact amount of wood needed, ultimately saving money and avoiding waste.

Reporters have stopped by to see Callahan's cork flooring, UV-ray water treatment system, and her toilets. Callahan laughs as she recites the story about National Public Radio calling to do a story about the house. "As a professor, sort of the be-all, end-all is the call from NPR," she says. "But then the guy doesn't want to talk about whistle blowing, which is my primary research area. He wants to listen to my toilet flush!"

Callahan's dual-flush toilets look like normal toilets

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but have two flushes: a 0.8-gallon flush for liquid waste and a 1.6-gallon flush for what the manufacturers call "bulk" waste, a euphemism that makes Callahan roll her eyes and chuckle. A guest once thought the flush buttons were a yin-yang symbol instead of the devices that can save the average family of four 6,000 gallons of water each year.

Local builders and contractors have also come to see the house. Callahan agreed to open her doors to professional visitors when she decided to make her house a green building research site with the National Association of Home Builders, the U.S. Green Building Council, and the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority.

Callahan plans to live the rest of her days in her new abode — a real possibility because of its universal design. The downstairs room connected to the barrier-free bathroom will become the master suite when the couple can no longer use the stairs. "We're going to die in this house," Callahan says, with a smile. 🌿

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**POWER HOUSE:** Of the more than 200 homes that are LEED certified, only four have received the gold rating. Subtle touches like a linseed-oil finish on the wood paneling, natural stone countertops, and non-toxic organic paint on the walls make this seemingly common lakehouse a low impact zone.

(Opposite) **NATURE'S BEST FRIEND FOREVER:** Callahan, with her dog, Toby, saves money and the environment with cork floors and dual-flush toilets.



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