

Historic Buildings Go Green in Tompkins County

By Kristen Olson, Historic Ithaca's Preservation Services Coordinator

Here in Tompkins County, historic buildings are going green and businesses are meeting the demand for skilled restoration professionals. Several recent and ongoing projects illustrate how sustainability and historic buildings are a natural match, proving there is little difference between “green building” and “historic preservation”.

On East State Street, construction is underway on the Argos Inn, a multi-year project to restore the former Cowdry House and convert it to a boutique hotel. Owner Avi Smith and his crew have decided to apply for LEED certification. LEED, or Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, is a green building certification system that awards points for a wide array of features ranging from efficient plumbing fixtures to proximity to public transportation. Smith pointed out that many of the steps— such as careful recycling of construction waste – don't add much cost to a project but have a significant impact on sustainability.

Smith didn't think about LEED at first, as his first concern was preserving the historic elements of the building. “But,” he says, “the more we got into it, it just became very obvious that it was possible, even with an older house, to bring it up to [LEED standards], and that was very satisfying to realize.”

On Balance Systems, the window restoration contractor for the Argos Inn, was founded by Shad Ryan after he attended a professional-level window restoration workshop at Historic Ithaca. Ryan, along with two employees, works on about 60 windows per month at residential and commercial sites. “We're very busy,” he says, “the response has been great and folks are very interested in not throwing these windows away.”

Ryan and other window contractors have a broad impact on sustainability; they are keeping materials out of the landfill while reducing demand for replacement products, but they are also increasing the windows' year-round performance by returning them to good working order.

Another business making area buildings greener is Taitem Engineering, an Ithaca-based firm that specializes in green building design services. The company recently completed an energy retrofit of its two office buildings, both former residences built around the turn of the 20th century, on South Albany Street in Ithaca.

Facilities Manager Rob Rosen says that the company undertook the retrofit to reduce energy use in the building, to reduce operating expenses, and to have a positive impact on the environment. The project resulted in a Preservation Award from Historic Ithaca for the introduction of energy-

efficiency and sustainability features that do not harm the buildings' historic character. Sustainable design was carried through to details like boot brushes to keep the buildings cleaner and reduce wear and tear on carpets.

Like at the Argos Inn, Rosen acknowledged that there are more ideas for improving energy efficiency that Taitem will probably implement in the future. The retrofit illustrates the company's commitment to sustainable design, and Rosen says, "we did what any other building owner should do."

Local restoration and design consultant Victoria Romanoff, a principal partner in V. Romanoff & Associates, has witnessed changing public awareness of energy efficiency in buildings. Since 1965, she has worked on hundreds of historic buildings in Central New York, and recently her clients have started asking more and more about how to incorporate sustainable features in their buildings.

Romanoff suggests that owners first look at the spaces that aren't typically visible – basements and attics – to add insulation, then to repair original windows and add storm windows. Her advice is to do as much as possible without damaging the historic character of the building, and she stresses that with today's products and technologies, there are usually solutions that won't intrude upon a building's historic fabric.

In addition to energy savings, the restoration and retrofit of historic buildings contributes to our community by creating local, green, skilled jobs that keep construction dollars in our local economy. Historic buildings also contribute to the sense of place, livable scale, and vibrancy that make our communities attractive places for residents and businesses.

For more information about historic preservation in Tompkins County, visit www.historicithaca.org.

This article appeared in print in Tompkins Weekly October 17-23, 2011.
