Hardcore recycler builds beyond green

■ *Martha Rose develops houses with environmental values in mind.*

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Photo by Lisa Lannigan

Builder Martha Rose recently finished her first certified Built Green house in North Beach.

Martha Rose has her eye on the big environmental picture.

As one of the area's smaller contracting companies, Martha Rose Construction builds single-family and small-scale multifamily houses, mostly on speculation. Each is built with a focus on recycling reusable building materials, cutting down construction waste, and keeping with environmentally friendly practices.

"I've always been interested in finding ways to make a difference," Rose said. "It's not right to waste. In our country, we use most of the resources of the world, even though we have a relatively small portion of the population. That doesn't seem right."

Getting started

Rose got started in construction in the early 1970s in the Washington, D.C., area. "At that time, there was a shortage of trades people and a building boom was going on. They were hiring just about anybody."

That time also coincided with the movement of women challenging the status quo and employment rights in traditionally male jobs, she said.

"There were stories of lawsuits being brought against companies that wouldn't hire women," Rose said.

The help-wanted ads were full of advertisements looking for carpenters and laborers. "It was pretty hard to tell a woman that there was no job," she said. "I was able to get in. I think it would have been very difficult otherwise."

It wasn't just the availability of jobs that brought Rose into construction. "I knew I liked working with my hands, I knew I didn't like working in an office."

She also had friends working in construction, "and they would talk about their pay that's double or more of what I (made)."

Rose spent the next 10 years as a carpenter, working her way up through the ranks. She moved from the East Coast to Portland, then to Washington state. She worked on construction of the West Seattle Bridge in 1982.

She later worked for the city of Seattle as a building inspector. While there, she saw a need in the community for a "free-lance" project manager, as she calls it. She left the city in 1986 to peddle her services as a construction manager.

"I was slowly able to get myself into a position of buying a first lot and building my first house," Rose said. "I'm still a small builder by city of Seattle standards, but I'm a lot happier being able to build my own projects.... I can implement the features I want to implement. I get to make all those decisions."

Those decisions include making environmentally friendly choices, such as recycling house fixtures, re-using plants on the site and reducing construction waste.

Building green

Rose's interest in building green got started with the energy crisis in the mid-70s, she said. Many of her peers were taking advantage of small energy grants and alternative forms of energy, and she helped organize alternative energy fairs.

"I was living in the shadow of a nuclear power plant that was under construction. I learned about the potential dangers of living near nuclear waste," she said. "If people would simply conserve energy, our need for new power plants would greatly diminish."

A friend, who worked for the state Legislature in Olympia, told her "If I didn't like the way things were done, that I should join whatever it was as a way of changing them from within."

"In a slow, meandering way, I became a developer as a way of putting my ideas out there," she said.

Rose said she hadn't heard of the Built Green program until she joined the Master Builders Association of King and Snohomish Counties about two years ago. But much of the program's requirements were things she'd been doing already.

Martha Rose Construction recently finished work on its first officially certified Built Green home, which received the program's highest rating of three stars. The North Beach house was built using durable materials including commercial-grade porcelain floor tiles and wool carpeting. Energy-efficient features include gas appliances and fiberglass/wood windows that cut down on heat loss. Solar tubes are used instead of skylights to bring natural light into a hallway and laundry room.

Using a custom cabinet maker cuts down on packaging waste. Rose has used the same custom cabinet shop for 16 or 17 years, she said.

"On a couple of occasions, the builders that I worked with as project manager used prepackaged cabinets. The pre-manufactured boxes come with maximum packaging," Rose said, while a locally-made, custom cabinet requires little to no packaging.

"The way we buy our doors is the same way. We buy it from a small shop. They have zero packaging on them," she said.

Rose calls herself a "hardcore recycler." Even before joining the Built Green program, Rose was separating and shipping off recyclable construction waste. "I trained the guys who worked with me to flatten boxes," and put them out for the city's recycling program, she said.

In preparing a site for construction, trees and stumps are cut up for firewood and mulch, which are used instead of sod for landscaping.

Junk found in the ground, such as hunks of concrete and bricks, are pulled out of the dirt and sent to a recycler.

Mature plants that can be salvaged are dug up and used on another site. "It's wonderful, because a mature plant is a lot nicer than one that's small, and they're not getting thrown away," she said.

The big picture

Using durable materials, not cutting corners and recycling everything possible is not cheap. "I have been told that I'm not a great business person," Rose said. "But the bottom line isn't the maximum amount of money. If that was my main goal, I wouldn't do a lot of the things I do."

Martha Rose Construction doesn't spend a lot of money on hauling junk to the dump. When it tears down a house, it gives away

Martha Rose

Continued from page 4

cabinets and flooring to a second-use building materials company. Whatever can be reused is saved, "instead of us just throwing it in the garbage."

But the time and labor spent recycling is costly. Rose said it would probably be a lot faster, and cheaper, to just clear a site and pay to haul everything away.

"In my opinion, it's all worth it in the big picture," she said. "Some people wouldn't bother with it. Is it a cost savings? Maybe yes, maybe no....It's just the right thing to do. That's what is seems like to me."

Rose is hoping that some people will be willing to pay more for a quality, certified three-star Built Green home by keeping in mind the cost savings that come with energy efficiency and durable materials that will ultimately last longer.

"They will pay more for a Built Green home, but it is just like a savings account," Rose said. "It's like getting a rebate every month."

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#03-196
Bids due: Sep 11 at 2 pm
Owner: City & Borough of Juneau Purchasing, 105 Municipal Way, Room 300, Mail: 155 S Seward St., Juneau AK 99801, 907-586-5258, fax 907-586-4561
Bids to: Owner
Submittal Docs: from Owner
Scope: Furnish and deliver copier/printer paper which the owner will order on an "as needed" basis in minimum quantities of 40 cases.
(bid advertisement in this issue)

Gases

Project: Gases, specialty and industrial, Statewide, WA, #10803
Bids due: Sep 16 at 2 pm

FIFTH AND Seventh Street Southeast interconnect, City of Puyallup; Addendum 1.

EVERETT LANDFILL and Tire Fire site, perimeter landfill gas collection and disposal system, City of Everett; Addendum 1.

ELECTRIC REBUILD - Laurel Street and Washington Street substations, City of Port Angeles; Addendum 1, due date changed from Sep 6 to Sep 5.

EDWARD SPRINGS Treatment Facility improvements, City of Marysville; due date changed from Sep 4 to Sep 11.

BOONES FERRY Primary School sports field, West Linn-Wilsonville Sch Dist 3JT; Addendum 1, due date changed from Sep 3 to Sep 5.