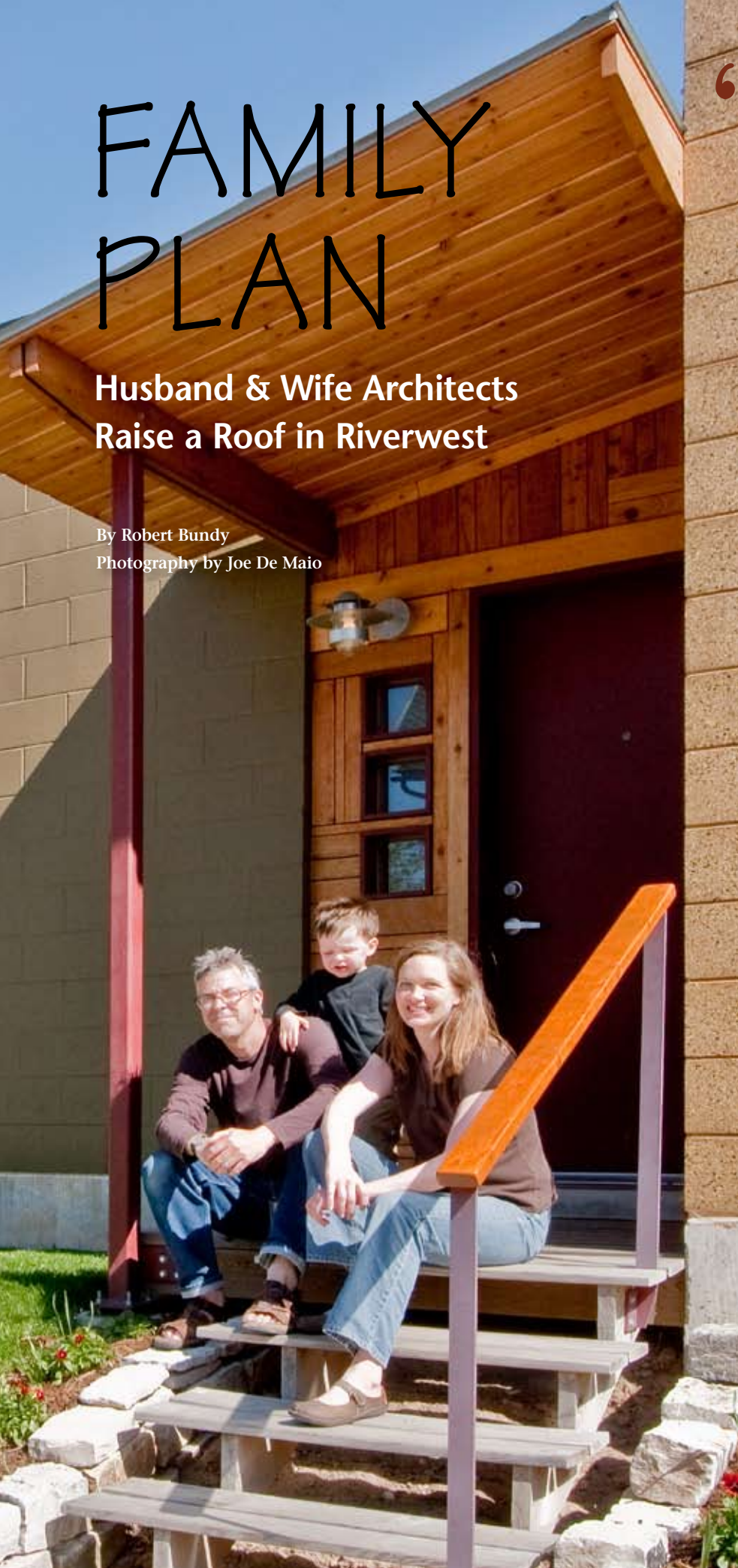


FAMILY PLAN

Husband & Wife Architects
Raise a Roof in Riverwest

By Robert Bundy
Photography by Joe De Maio



“Many people think of green or sustainable architecture in terms of technologies or expensive systems,” says architect and homeowner Patrick Jones. He rattles off examples like solar panels, geothermal heating systems and wind turbines to underscore his point. “But we don’t regard sustainable design as an optional decision; it’s an umbrella principle that covers everything.” Patrick, together with his wife and fellow architect Alex Ramsey, has created a living space that functions as both an artistic mission statement and a thoroughly enjoyable family home in Riverwest.

Surprisingly, the two talented architects did not initially intend to build their own house. “We looked at a lot of existing older houses, but they were not conducive to the way our family lives,” says Patrick. “We wanted a flexible space with only a few generous rooms.” Eventually, they decided to design their home themselves — from the ground up.

Laying the Groundwork

They finally settled on a vacant corner lot in Riverwest. It’s a sunny parcel, and that was important. “The solar orientation of the lot made us consider where each of the key elements would go,” explains Patrick. The two had a wish list of favored materials, and knew in the broadest sense that they wanted a structure that turned inward in an urban setting. “We had this kind of kit-of-parts that we were shuffling around in response to what the lot offered,” relates Patrick. Inspired by the simplicity of brick warehouses, they knew they wanted to employ structure as finish, highlighting the spare, inherent beauty of masonry block, steel lentils and concrete surfaces. “Our focus was on durability, quality and simplicity,” Alex says. In the fall of 2003, they began construction on their new home.

Raising the Roof

The new home was conceived as a single space, separated into distinct areas by the addition of modular partitions. The exterior shell is primarily composed of masonry block from



Patrick designed the dining room table (above), and built its teak plank tabletop. Rik-Tik Welding assembled the base. A glass “jiffy-Lube” garage door in the living room (below) rolls up to blur the division between the interior and exterior spaces.

Premier Block in Wausau, a wealth of windows from H Window in Ashland, oiled cedar cladding, and a super-insulated roof lined underneath with a warm layer of Douglas Fir. For the interior walls they opted for burnished concrete block, which utilizes a nicer matrix and aggregate than the exterior facing blocks. “It’s kind of like terrazzo, and they cut and polish it,” Alex explains. “It’s beautiful.”

By September of 2004, the exterior was completed. The interior was fairly Spartan at that point, but as their apartment lease was expiring, they gamely elected to move in anyway, essentially camping out in the now-finished shell. With no kitchen whatsoever, they cooked on an old camp stove and washed dishes in the laundry room sink. “We were motivated to finish the kitchen pretty quickly, I can tell you that,” Alex laughs. “And we were just able to have it finished in time for Thanksgiving.”

Prepared to Fail

Rather than import exotic stone across great distances, the countertops in the



kitchen and bathroom are of inexpensive concrete, made right on site by Patrick himself. “We clipped out an article from *Fine Homebuilding* on how to do it,” Alex remembers. Patrick also bought a how-to book, and picked the expert brain of his friend and concrete guru Marty Weber (profiled in our January 2008 Artisan section) for helpful tips. Either Marty is an amazing teacher or Patrick is a prodigy — maybe

a little of both — because the three completed concrete surfaces that now grace the kitchen and two bathrooms are handsome additions to the home. “We were prepared to fail. If the countertops didn’t work out, well, then we’d end up with a great landscape paver,” Patrick jokes. “And honestly, that’s how we’ve undertaken every project with this house. If you’re prepared to fail, you’re never upset with the outcome.”

The Great Outdoors

The L-shaped design of the house wraps around an internal courtyard, and this is the most appealing aspect of the home. When the weather is fair, a wall of windows in the living room reveals itself to be a glass-paned industrial garage door that easily rolls up to the ceiling, further blurring the division between indoor and outdoor spaces, and also helping to cool the house. Especially

The home’s courtyard is sheltered on all four sides, offering privacy and security, and effectively creating a microclimate that helps extend the growing season for their flower and vegetable gardens.





when the door is raised, the house and yard together are immediately comprehensible as a single, fluid space; an elegantly simple system encapsulating a vital green heart. The courtyard is separated from the alley by a large garage/workshop that connects to the main structure, and the bermed-up hillside of the traditional home next door closes the circle, creating a cloistered outdoor retreat. Better yet, by sheltering this green parcel of land, they've created a microclimate that retains the warmth of the day. This heat-retention results in a longer growing season for plants — good news for their flower and vegetable gardens — and is a bolster against the chilly evenings of early spring and late fall. Rain barrels, rain gardens and the extensive use of native plantings help to keep the landscape lush. The limestone pavers that lend so much character and texture to the courtyard were salvaged from a 5th Ward street re-paving project. When the small square of lawn gets too shaggy, Patrick mows it with a reel mower using old-fashioned elbow grease.



Patrick built the kitchen countertops himself (opp., top). A headboard (opp., bottom) also functions as a divider that separates their closets from the rest of the master bedroom. The kids' room (top) is bright and warm, with lots of space for rest and play.

Let's Get Passive!

The orientation of the home was angled along the East-West axis to expose as much of the structure as possible to the sun. Further taking advantage of passive solar gain, the dark, concrete slab floor and the heavy masonry walls absorb the sun's heat and gradually release it back into the living space after sunset, thus moderating the thermal swings that are typical in a wood-framed house. The super-insulated roof and walls help maintain a comfortable and consistent interior environment, and allows the high-efficiency radiant-floor heating system to sip energy rather than gulp it.

Another smart strategy is the exploitation of natural light. Every room has windows on two or more sides, and the modular floor plan allows ambient light to filter throughout the entire home. This plan also assists airflow throughout the house.

The partitions themselves are a subtle example of economical design. Each interior wall is exactly the height of a single sheet of drywall. This means there were no scraps left over after construction was completed, saving money and sparing the landfills. Other walls perform double-duty as closets and cabinets. Simple, frugal and efficient.

Final decorating touches contribute additional warmth to the house. The artworks that adorn the walls are gifts from their fellow architects. The furniture is a combination of family antiques and pieces made by the couple themselves. A home-made mobile by Alex brings a dash of color and movement to the kids' room, and is updated regularly to keep things interesting.

Looking Ahead

The modular layout is designed to evolve along with them, allowing them to easily

reshape the configuration of rooms to suit their future needs. The building is even capable of accommodating a second floor without additional retrofitting. That second story can be done all at once, or in stages, with extra rooms added as they are needed. With two growing boys, Patrick and Alex are already floating plans for moving upstairs.

The Ramsey-Joneses set out to build a home for their family, but in the process they set a fine example for being green by being smart. Their house is a model of thrift, but that economy was not achieved at the expense of pleasing design. Far from it.

"The openness and the light — it's like being halfway outside all the time," Alex sighs, "I just love it. It's crafted very specifically for our lives, for the way we live, the way our kids live. It's a house that really performs."

Encore!