

In The Field

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Earth, Wind and Fire: A Roundtable Discussion

East Coast Home + Design sits down with prominent Architects and Builders to discuss three topics pertinent to today's housing market

T On the 14th of March, after the sturm und drang of Super Storm Sandy and crippling February snowfalls, a group of accomplished builders and architects met to talk about the issues they're facing: the integration of sustainable elements in the home, the inevitable wake-up call of recent extreme weather events, and where the industry stands now. Hosted by family-owned Gault Energy in Westport, now celebrating their 150th year, the discussion was moderated by editor Matt Kolk, who brought his own knowledge and concerns to the table. What

follows are contributions by some of the most respected builders and architects in Fairfield County. This is by no means all inclusive of what was said in the more than two hours of discussion, but it's indicative of how the industry is thinking.

STAINABILITY

1. Three years ago, at a previous panel moderated by Mr. Kolk, a question was asked regarding integrating sustainable elements into the home and how this affected code. The general consensus from the audience at that time was that there was a

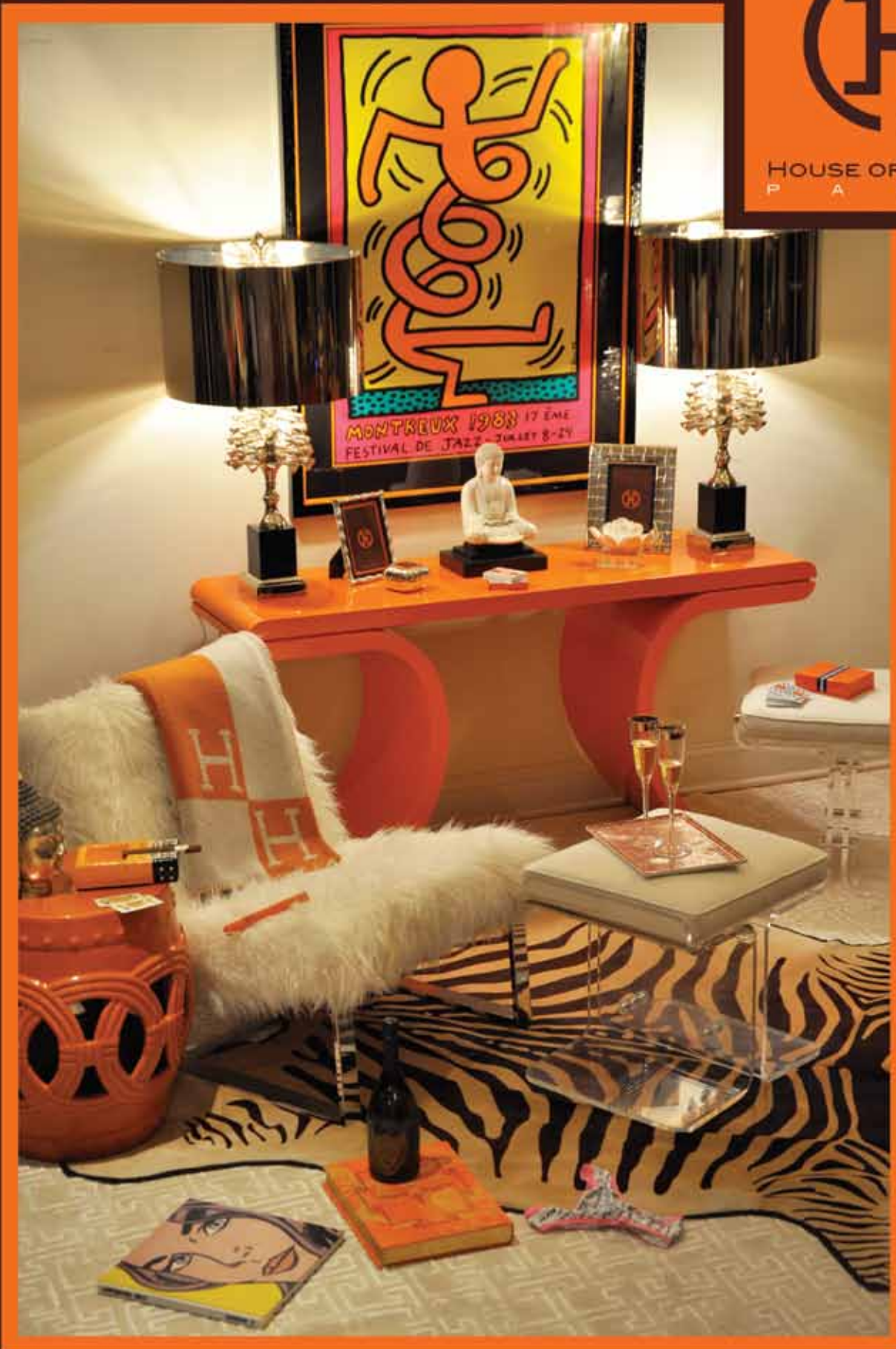
great disparity from inspector-to-inspector and from town-to-town in the knowledge level of sustainable integration and code. Has the level of continuity and knowledge with regard to local codes changed in the past three years?

SELLARS: Unfortunately, not enough. Inspectors are still overlooking –or perhaps don't know to look for – critical air sealing, insulation, HVAC, and lighting requirements that were put forth in the 2009 IECC (International Energy Conservation Code adopted in Sept 2011). Now that the 2012 IECC is slated for adoption,

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inspectors really have to get up to speed. Otherwise, architects and builders will not be forced to learn about – and integrate – sustainable building practices.

HILTON: Sometimes it takes a while for codes to keep up with the advancements in sustainability. For example, we struggled with the setback code for geothermal wells. If you adhered to code, so many feet from drinking water wells, walls, the house, you'd be hard put to find a house with enough land for everything. But they cut the setbacks in half which made things feasible.

SANDERS: Demand is really squeezing the codes. Design pushes the envelope, too. You want to meet the needs and desires of your client, but you don't want to be a quickie builder, either. You don't want to build a home that doesn't stand the test of time.

TOMASETTI: I'm concerned that the whole green movement may have created a new level of bureaucracy. Do we really need to re-regulate the industry when we're really still working on it? It's not just "Is the product green?", but we have to consider whether or not it's worth the cost, will it last? Is this a short-term solution? You don't want to handcuff the innovators in the industry with regulations. We need the freedom to experiment. This is why most architects are attracted to the profession. It's creative. Not just design but technologically. As far as the building codes are concerned, sustainability is not their focus. The codes are all about life-safety. Sustainability is a desirable sidebar.

2. What are the challenges that still exist in the integration of sustainable elements in the home?

HOFFMAN: Price, mainly. People want sustainable homes. They want to save on energy and save the planet, but they weigh

the price against what they'll save, and sometimes it doesn't make sense to them.

WADIA: It should. Slate is a sustainable element, and a slate roof will last up to 120 years, compared to a asphalt roof



which will last about 20, if you're lucky. And they have no personality. Replacing an asphalt roof a few times costs about the same as a slate roof.

MATTHEWS: And cogeneration. It's going to add \$100,000 to the cost of the

construction but this 5-foot tall "box", built by Blueprint Energy Group and powered by a car engine, will heat the house, the pool, household water, snow melt systems, whatever else - and eliminate the

need for an expensive generator in case of a power outage. It also turns excess electricity back to the grid where the home-owner can sell it to the electric company. Combined with geothermal installations, this system is not only "green", it's economical, but it's hard to sell smart, expensive choices.

TIEFENTHALER: In addition to that, unfortunately, there are unexpected side effects to some of the green decisions we make. For example, we seal up the houses to conserve heat and we end up creating a house that doesn't breathe. We have a "sick house". We have to install ventilation. In fact, that's required by code now.

TOMASETTI: What about foam insulation? Will it be hard to make changes? We don't want, a few years from now, to find out foam insulation is the next asbestos.

HILTON: We don't. But in walls that are 2'X6' or 8' or 10', there's no need to fill in the walls completely, so there's room to make changes in electrical and plumbing.

TIEFENTHALER: Green is used as a sale tool as much as an energy conservation tool. It's marketing. Besides, many of the things that are touted as green really are not. Consider the cost of shipping. For example, the New Zealand pine that was supposedly grown green had to be shipped

literally half-way around the globe. By the time it got here, it had a serious carbon footprint, but it sounded good -- to have your house made of sustainable New Zealand pine. We don't even have a legal definition of what constitutes "green."

OPPOSITE TOP TO BOTTOM

Rick Tomasetti, Jeff Titus and Rob Snaders
ECH+D EIC Matthew Kolk
Rick Krug and Todd Drury

GRANDBERG: I'm not overly enthusiastic about green. We'll use what's out there to save the planet and conserve energy; we're aware of the tools available for us. But sustainability is not the driver. I am concerned with design, quality of life, and enjoyment. There are consultants on green architecture who are making money telling their clients what a reputable architect already knows. Snake oil salesmen. We don't need that.

SANDERS: Our specialty is historic homes, homes that were built to last. That's the true definition of "sustainability" — that the house wasn't going to be disposed of quickly. Those builders did not care about "green".



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TOP LEFT Jeromi Jablonski, RIGHT Chuck Hilton, Rob Sanders, Steve Mueller
BOTTOM LEFT Howard Lathrop, RIGHT Ira Grandberg

EXTREME WEATHER

1. Last October, we endured the “100 year storm”. What are some of issues you are currently facing directly related to the storm?

WADIA: The issues related to the storm are mostly commonsensical. If you live on the water’s edge, you have to know that when Mother Nature gets in a bad mood, you better be prepared. Typically, we make sure our homes are substantially above the mean high water mark and the elevations set by FEMA. As a result, although a few of our homes had damage caused by high winds and downed trees, we did not have any water damage.

HOFFMAN: One thing I want to say is that I am seeing the people behind the counter at the Greenwich building and zoning departments being amazingly accommodating. They’re not saying, “Call your builder, or call your architect”; they’re

giving helpful advice about electrical and plumbing and general repairs.

FRANKEL: We’re fielding insurance issues. People who have 100% replacement coverage need to have the cost of repairs verified. I tell our clients not to take the money the insurance company first offers. We need to get over there and see if that amount will actually cover the replacement costs.

KRUG: The area was so impacted by the storm that there were not enough insurance adjusters available. The insurance companies brought in adjusters from other areas of the country that don’t understand the cost of living here. As a result there are homeowners still living with tarps on their homes.

FRANKEL: As far as changes to building houses after Sandy, really there hasn’t been much change. Newer constructions already had floodways and break-away walls. I think home-buyers are aware of it now, making sure that when they buy an existing

house, it has those things or those things can be added.

MUELLER: Coastal Area Management (CAM) and FEMA require homeowners in the AE and Z Flood Zones to build a new home or raise the existing house to a specified elevation above sea level. This is all makes sense except that the local zoning regulations have not made any provisions or exceptions to these requirements with regard to height or floor area ratio. I think surveyors, civil engineers, land use attorneys, architects, and builders should form committees in each municipality to review these issues. We need to establish guidelines for future developments along the Connecticut coastline.

SELLARS: Which leads to what I might call blessings in disguise. Due to incredible damage and prolonged black-outs, clients are requesting maintenance-free products and materials, the need for structural wind load design, and methods for conserving energy. These are good issues to have to face, but it’s a challenge to negotiate the local conservation and planning & zoning departments. For example, super-efficient, water-tight walls are thicker than standard, and on small beachfront lots, every inch is critical. Do you make the rooms smaller or can the footprint be larger? The Town of Westport has made accommodations for increased footprint and height due to the increase in base flood elevation. Unfortunately, a zoning variance is often required.

2. What advice could you give to the homeowner in regards to FEMA requirements?

PARKER: I’d tell them to pay attention to FEMA regulations. We built a house on Todd’s Point way before Sandy and the house sustained no damage at all. They dragged all their furniture up to the second floor but they didn’t have to. Anyone who isn’t listening to FEMA is flirting

with reality.

MATTHEWS: I agree. We had a job right on the water in Greenwich which incorporated all of FEMA's regulations and it suffered minimal damage. Another pre-existing house, built in 1927 before anyone ever even heard of flood vents, was flooded with two feet of water. Luckily, my client had not moved in yet, and they had intended to tear down 75% of the house anyway. The house was empty when Sandy moved in!

WADIA: I have clients building above FEMA requirements. They're not taking any chances.

THE ECONOMIC FACTOR

1. It has been several years now since the "Great Recession", financial experts have told us that the recession is now over and that home values are on the rise. What changes have you seen in your industry from pre-recession to post-recession?

GRANDBERG: I don't see much change at all. There are those who don't feel that the economy can be defined as post-recession.

FRANKEL: Well, I do think clients are negotiating more. They think that because the economy is struggling, prices would go down; but unfortunately, in most cases, the prices might be higher. Manufacturers and suppliers are not carrying large inventories; blue collar workers are earning more.

PARKER: There's a mixed assessment of what the current economic situation is. Some architects and builders are experiencing a real boom right now, but there is always that percentage at the top who can afford whatever they want no matter what the general economy is experiencing. We are seeing a lot of renovations, and our clients are cautious with their money.

We consider ourselves privileged to have survived the downturn. The recession weeded out a lot of people in the industry. That says a lot for the people here tonight. They were good enough to get through a time when clients demanded some real talent and thinking.

2. Where does the industry currently stand from an economic standpoint?

TIEFENTHALER: Recovering. Slowly. Bet-



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In The Field



Jim Hoffman and Dinyar Wadia



Ross Tiefenthaler

ter here than in most of the state, but clients are still concerned about value almost as much as sex appeal.

SELLARS: Slowly, yes. And cautiously optimistic.

MATTHEWS: Architects are just beginning to hire more people. That will result in work for builders. It's getting better. We have twice as many bids out this spring than last spring. That's the good news, but the competition is tougher and fees are down.

3. What special features of the home are trending / declining? Besides the basic elements of the home, what are the new "must-haves"?

DRURY: We are seeing tremendous interest in high end garages. Collectors of vintage and luxury automobiles consider them true works of art and think of these buildings as museums to showcase their collections. They include features that challenge the definition of "garage". Natural stone floors, radiant heating, car lifts, and entertainment systems are among the amenities. These clients plan to spend a lot of time there and also want living spaces like TV and game areas, kitchenettes and restrooms. The overall atmosphere is luxurious but feels comfortable, the perfect environment relaxing and entertaining.

We're getting more requests for luxury garages. Carlifts. Even underground garages. Garages with kitchens, bathrooms.

WADIA: Closets. I have a client that had us build an \$800,000 master bedroom closet.

PARKER: Amazing kitchens and bathrooms. That hasn't changed.

WADIA: A mudroom with a dog shower. (General laughter.)

WADIA: Recently, clients are requesting a study area near the kitchen where parents can keep an eye on what the kids are viewing on the computer and the internet. Something my parents happily didn't have when I was growing up!

PARKER: There are always specific requests, especially for the people with the money to spend, but what I see a lot of are requests for an "intelligent" system run by an iPad installed in the wall which will run everything around the house: heating, lighting, plasma TV, music, baby monitors, everything.

SELLARS: Lots of windows for natural day lighting, warm, natural materials combined with simple, clean aesthetics.

SANDERS: As always, the whole process is co-operative. All the special features. It's a synergy of the owner's desire, the architect's vision, and the builder's capability.

This synergy was evident in the two hours of round table contributions from everyone present. There was an air of cooperation and partnership, even an esprit de corps, which lasted throughout the evening and as attendees were heading for the door. And it was still raining, a gentle reminder of Sandy's recent visit. ■

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