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Boyce-Frost house paints Planet Green

By [Ken Edelstein](#)

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K.C. Boyce and Michelle Frost figured they needed more room.

The 950-square-foot bungalow they bought just before getting married in 2002 wasn't big enough for the family they hoped to raise. But they loved that little bungalow and its location in the Oakhurst neighborhood of Decatur. After looking around for another house, they decided to stay put.

This was a project Boyce had prepared for all his life.

Eric Rawlings kind of stumbled into green architecture. Actually, not the architecture part. He'd wanted to do that ever since his grandfather gave him a set of old drafting tools.

But the green emphasis came to him from an oblique angle. "I always wanted things to just work better," he says. So, when "a hippie-from-the-'60s-type professor" at the University of Kentucky preached buildings should be designed to use resources efficiently, it stuck with him.

"I slip a little bit of green on everybody," he says, "whether they know it or not."

Peter Michelson doesn't remember when he wasn't obsessed about the environment.

"When I was growing up [in Newton, Mass.], I got my whole family involved in composting," he says.

The descendant of a long line of builders, Michelson at first didn't get into the family business. He kicked around East Asia. Then he moved to Atlanta and became a teacher.

But when he needed to make more money for his growing family, Michelson pulled out the old hammer and started pounding away.

Boyce's interest in building a bigger house with a smaller carbon footprint was born from conviction: "My generation's challenge is to deal with resource shortages that other generations haven't had to deal with."

That's why, even before he and Frost decided to renovate, he joined the Southface Energy Institute and started volunteering for the Atlanta nonprofit, which is dedicated to encouraging eco-friendly construction. The 28-year-old senior project manager for the Atlanta Beltline even sat in on a home builders' course for Earthcraft, the Southface program that certifies energy-efficient, eco-friendly houses.

So he had a pretty good sense of what he wanted and which contractors to call when he and Frost started to think about their project.

About five years ago, Michelson convinced his brother to partner up with him in Atlanta. Soon, the two decided to specialize in Earthcraft. "Good business decisions fit with who you are," says Michelson, who named his company Renewal Construction.

The timing was perfect. Green housing was getting in vogue. "For some [clients], it's all about the dollars," Michelson says. "For some people, it's about ecology. For some people, it's about both. But green is about all those things - what's good for the environment, health, return on investment,



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Eric Rawlings

GREEN LIVIN': K.C. Boyce and Michelle Frost's house in Oakhurst will use passive solar design, insulation and energy-efficient systems to cut their carbon footprint.

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I hate nothing more than to talk about myself. I think I'm a great person but being single has plagued...

having something that's better built and won't deteriorate."

It took a while for Boyce and Frost to find Rawlings. They kept running into "green" architects whose style didn't grab them. And Boyce says that when they "talked green" to architects who shared their design sensibilities, "they said, 'Yeah, we've heard of that.'"

They spotted a yard sign for Rawlings in front of a renovation they liked in the neighborhood. Boyce gave him a call and went over their plans with Rawlings.

"Then," Rawlings says, "he pauses for a moment – like this was something he didn't want to tell me – and he kind of takes a deep breath, and he says 'and we want to go green.'"

"We'd finally found our match. It was the client I'd been searching for for years."

"**Zero emissions**" is a Holy Grail in green-building circles. Someday, the thinking goes, people ought to be able to build houses that use very little electricity and generate the power they do need from sources that don't pollute.

We're not there yet. Oh sure, a handful of zero-emission houses spot the globe – a basic, experimental solar home built for a competition by architecture students is on display at Georgia Tech; in California, government incentives have spurred a handful of adventurous homeowners to try zero emissions.

But this is Georgia, and Southface is practical. It developed Earthcraft in the 1990s along with the Greater Atlanta Homebuilders Association. The program is oriented toward helping builders ease into greener practices. The typical Earthcraft home cuts emissions by 28 percent, Southface says – progress nowhere near zero emissions.

Rawlings saw a chance to venture further with the Boyce-Frost house. He leveraged the Prairie Style design made famous by Frank Lloyd Wright to increase efficiency. Clerestory windows on the south side let light in and vent hot air. Wide overhangs block the hottest rays of the sun. He also designed cisterns, along the side of the house, that collect rainwater from the roof. At 2,271 square feet, the expanded home also will be smaller than the typical new American house.

"There's no silver bullet for getting there," Rawlings says. "It's a symphony of getting a lot of things to work together well."

Boyce and Frost worked with Michelson to plan other touches: high-efficiency heat pump, dual-flush toilets, recycled-glass counters, lighting that uses compact-fluorescent bulbs, efficient Energy Star appliances and, of course, a thick blanket of spray-foam insulation.

Then Michelson gave the couple an estimate.

"We went through a value-engineering phase," Boyce says.

Frost is blunter: "We were devastated, because there was actually no way we could afford it."

That was before they got lucky.

The Boyce-Frost house is a model. But it's also become a bit of an exception.

Last summer, Southface PR coordinator Ku'ulei Sako got a call from the Discovery Channel. Discovery was planning for a show on green housing on its new Planet Green network. A producer called Sako to find a homeowner and builder working together in Atlanta, and she had the perfect subjects: Boyce and Michelson had just gone over their plans with a Southface staffer as part of the Earthcraft process.

Boyce and Michelson are hesitant to discuss how being selected for the Planet Green show shifted the project's finances. But it did help them to keep doing what they'd always wanted – and then some. Most notably, they're using insulated, prefabricated panels, rather than spraying foam between conventional framing, and they've installed a geothermal heat and cooling system.

"We've taken to calling it the übergreen house," Michelson says.

Prompted by the Planet Green publicity, articles about the Boyce-Frost house are popping up in local media. "K.C. and I ... see it as our duty to do all this publicity," Frost says.

At a recent open house hosted by the couple in the nearly completed building, subcontractors and suppliers expounded on the environmental benefits of their techniques and products. But the publicity really is about an idea more than about vendors and contractors: Boyce and Frost expect

to use a quarter the energy of a similar-sized conventional home; isn't that a worthy goal for everyone?

The current fanfare over green housing seems sure to push home builders and their subcontractors toward shrinking footprints further. With their rising popularity, eco-friendly products are becoming better, less expensive and more familiar to tradesmen.

"As the stuff gets easier to install and more mainstream," Michelson says, "it's going to become more and more common."

The zero-emissions house? As long as Georgia doesn't offer incentives for reducing pollution, it's somewhere past the horizon.

But Boyce and Frost already are looking toward that horizon. Most likely, a zero emissions house in Georgia would require solar electric, or photovoltaic, panels. The panels and the other equipment can easily top \$30,000 – a cost that can't quite be justified economically. So the couple opted not to include solar-electric panels. But they did include the wiring.

"That," Boyce says, "is the next phase."

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