

## the language of LEED

Jason Hawthorne's industrial experience lends itself to expediting the LEED learning curve as SSH Homes takes on a new custom Houston home for energy-savvy owners

by David Hudnall

BECAUSE HE WORKS IN THE ENERGY INDUSTRY, GEORGE Li has long been aware of the merits of energy-efficiency; he has firsthand experience with the challenges of finding sufficient energy resources, and he and his wife, Lily, are ardent conservationists. So when they decided to design and build a new home on their existing lot in Houston, they knew they wanted it to be a LEED project. "We think a home reflects its owners," Li says. The question then became how to go about accomplishing it. They hired a rater to go through their home and determine what might need to be done, then held meetings with a few firms in the area, presenting what they were looking for.

In 2009, Jason Hawthorne, who heads up Houston-based SSH Homes, and John Sullivan, of Sullivan, Stevens, Henry, Oggero and Associates—the design firm SSH partners with on design-build projects—met with the Lis. The two parties gelled, and SSH was awarded the contract to build the home. "I knew that LEED was a requirement for the job, and I didn't possess all that much knowledge on the subject, so I took some courses in the NAHB curriculum that were offered locally by the Greater Houston Builder's Association, and brushed up," Hawthorne says. "They provided important insight about the feasibilities of LEED features," Li mentions. "It was a critical part of convincing us that a LEED home was actually within our budget."

As it turned out, Hawthorne's previous experience—he graduated from Texas A&M in 1996 with a degree in industrial distribution and had spent 10 years in project management with an electrical-manufacturing firm—was valuable for learning the LEED language. "What I'd done in the industrial world, in terms of meeting guidelines and preparing documentation, is similar to what you have to do with LEED," he says. "Plus, some of our building standard practices already met some of the [LEED] sustainability and energy-efficient criteria."

Construction on the Li home involved first tearing down a previous structure (SSH recycled all concrete). The lumber supplier turnkey-framed the house—meaning they returned any unused lumber back to its facility. "We're being very conscious of what we waste, and we're finding that there are

very simple ways to conserve," Hawthorne says. Though no solar panels are currently planned, the house was oriented to allow for them in the future, and a large space of the roof has been cleared to that end. SSH is also installing radiant-barrier roof decking, tankless water heaters, low-flow plumbing, and a Honeywell energy-recovery-ventilator system. The air conditioning is zoned—there are only two units in the entire 6,384-square-foot house—and thermostats are programmable. West-facing windows are Low-E 366, the insulation system is a combination of batt and blown cellulose, and all hardwood floors will be reclaimed material; the floors on the first level will be retained from the original structure that was torn down. Li notes that achieving enough points for LEED certification was in many ways about simple common sense. "We didn't have to break the bank, and we're particularly proud of being able to earn enough LEED points without having to go way beyond current design/construction practices," Li says. "It's about selecting the right combination of methods and products, which requires early planning."

Hawthorne—who utilizes Sullivan, Stevens, Henry, Oggero and Associates for all design-build projects and continues to build custom residential homes throughout the Houston area—says he'll be incorporating a number of LEED standards into all future projects. "We won't necessarily go for LEED on every new project, but the plan is to have clients approaching us who see us as a builder who is willing to help them achieve a LEED-certified or NAHB Green Home-certified house," he says.

The Li home should be an effective way to advertise. "I think people will be surprised to find out our house will be LEED, because of how well it fits into the neighborhood, appearance-wise," Li says. For Hawthorne, the Li residence will represent the rewards of adapting in the industry. "Some builders just don't want to deal with all the little nuances involved with a project like this," he says. "But we didn't resent it at all—we embraced it. We know it's the way of the future. Adjusting to that gives you a competitive advantage." *gb&d*

BELOW: (From left) John L. Sullivan, Jr., Jason Hawthorne, and George Li.

