

## Ready for a Ride? *A Galloping Start on Integrative Design*

### Are you ready for a ride?

In 19th Century Paris, architecture students at the Ecole des Beaux Arts were assigned a design problem and a short amount of time in which to solve it. Rushed, the students would speed their drawings from their studios to the Ecole in a horse-drawn cart called a charette in meet their deadlines. And, in the time-honored tradition of students the world over, often they would be working until the absolute last minute – drawing madly in the cart as it rocked over cobble streets to put the finishing touches on their designs before they were handed in.

Whether you're building a new house or renovating an old one, I'd like to invite you to hop into the charette with your building professionals. The horse and the cart have receded into memory and metaphor at this point, but the swirling sense of creativity that comes with an intense set of design challenges and a tight time frame in which to solve them remains. The charette has become a brainstorming session wherein building professionals "listen...envision...and then draw fast!"

In the green building world, architects, builders, contractors, landscape designers, and owners have adopted the eco-charette – as the most powerful tool as their disposal for creating green buildings. What makes an eco-charette so extraordinary is that it challenges all of the partners in a design and build project to come together and find integrated solutions to inhabitants' needs, energy demands, and environmental sustainability before the project is underway.

If you've worked on a house at some point in your life, you know that generally the commercial building industry has become a fractured set of specialties. Your architect, if you're working with one, talks with you and draws up a set of plans. Then, your contractor builds, bringing in subcontractors to fit their best solutions for plumbing and heating systems to the extant plans.

Then, generally with much angst and the occasional threat of divorce, you make your interior design choices, like wall colors and floor covers, cabinets, appliances, fittings, and so on, and the various folks hired on to do these installations work them in.

Finally, when all of the dust settles, you landscape – trying to retrofit around the house and the earth that got moved around to create a yard and a garden.

And it's only when you move in that you realize that those beautiful windows that you adored in the plans are facing due west and your living room is uninhabitable the entire summer unless you want to spend your kid's college tuition on air conditioning. Or that your entire front yard is a swamp every time it rains because of runoff from your driveway. Or that the glorious old oak tree that made you want to buy the lot in the first place is now dying because its roots have been so damaged by the construction equipment sitting on them for six months.

This is where the horse and the cart comes in. The eco-charette forms the cornerstone of a completely different way to work this process. Instead of a series of reactive decisions based on an original set of plans, all of the folks dedicated to the process of making your house as marvelous as it is in your imagination come together and create a unified vision for how to make that happen before anyone has lifted a finger.

This way, all of you can work together as partners to make sure that each of your decisions isn't made in a vacuum or a "if I don't decide today my flooring guy isn't going to be able to come back until sometime in June of 2007" panic. It will dramatically diminish, if not eliminate the "if only I'd thought of" regrets that we usually have when building or renovating. And it will establish a connection between design professionals so they can help you make intelligent decisions about how energy systems interconnect – what about those windows, and how to place them, and what would be the best heating and cooling system to use? Would it help if the house was shifted on the site? Or if the landscaper could plant fast-growing trees in a certain place to ensure shade hitting your roof during the hottest part of the day?

Whether you've got a huge team of professionals as you design your dream home, or if you, like my husband and I, are renovating an old, tired house by yourselves as time and money permits, taking the time to imagine all of the possibilities will enrich and green your home. Pull your team together and challenge them to join you in the charette and in all likelihood you will end up with a livable, sustainable house that pleases your senses and doesn't empty your wallet.

For more information on how to put an integrated design process together, check out David Robert Johnston's book, *Building Green in a Black and White World*. And enjoy the ride!

*(Leigh Melander is a member of the Sustainability Council of Ventura County. You can find out more about their activities on their website, [www.sustainabilitycouncil.org](http://www.sustainabilitycouncil.org))*