

At Home: GREEN ACRES ECO-COMMUNITY

Story by LEAH SHAPIRO | Photos by PAUL M. HOWEY



A furniture maker, brewer, engineer, designer, and builder, John McDermott is a man of many talents. John, who moved to Asheville from Charlotte in 1994, cofounded Highland Brewing Company. After several years with Highland, John decided to switch gears and enter our region's craft scene with his furniture making business called bola design.

At about the same time, John decided he wasn't too impressed with the houses on the market, so he decided to build his own in southeast Asheville. It wasn't long before he'd built several more, living for a time in each one.

When John purchased 23 acres of land in 2011, the idea of developing Asheville's first net-zero energy community hadn't yet crossed his mind.

"I bought this piece of land with the sole idea of doing something green," says John. "When I bought it, I didn't know what exactly I was going to do, but I knew it was going to be green homes."

Soon after, John designed and constructed the first house, called the "Barn House," as well as a separate studio nearby. It was after the installation of solar paneling on the house that he says he developed the vision for a community. "We produced as much energy as we were using, so I decided to make the commitment of doing that throughout the community."

While his previous homes were built with passive solar design, these new homes would be net-zero energy buildings. In other words, the total amount of energy used per year in the home would be roughly equal to the amount of renewable energy produced. John hopes to eventually expand the community to include nine homes, all with net-zero energy consumption.

After living for a year in the Barn House, John sold it and moved into the Redbud House (pictured here), where he currently lives. The house is on the market, and once it sells, he will move into the recently renovated studio.

The concept behind the homes in Green Acres, John says, is really quite simple: conserve energy. "In other words, put investment into how the house is designed and how it's insulated and how tight it is. This is less expensive than producing energy." While solar panels help offset energy costs, the primary design focus is to save energy. "These homes are super efficient, super insulated, with geothermal heating and cooling."

John says, "Green Acres is a real-world illustration of the viability of sustainable design—not only in environmental terms, materials used, or energy efficiency, but also as it applies to broader economic concerns, social impact, food, water, and self-sufficiency."

Between studying furniture design at San Diego State University and agricultural engineering at Rutgers University, John has a technical background that is evidenced by the house's aesthetic appeal and sound structure.

With its locust posts and dry stacked stone, the exterior of the Redbud House is what John calls mountain craft. Once you get inside, however, the house has a more modern style with its open floor plan. Much of the wood, such as the cherry and oak, used in

finishing was harvested from downed trees.

In addition to quilts, paintings, and ceramics made by local artists, the house is also decorated with John's wood pieces, including a clock, wheelbarrow table, dining room table, countertops, and a bench that incorporates rowing machine seats.

Sitting beneath large windows, plants thrive here. "Once a week, I make a salad out of these plants," says John, who is also interested in growing his own food. There's also a community orchard and several edible gardens on the property.

To learn more, visit greenacresasheville.com.



John McDermott