

KING OF GREENS

Philly homeowners get increasingly eco-friendly.

BY GREG HALBREICH

"These are recycled paper countertops," Todd Ballantyne says as I run my hand over the hard blue surface. "A lot of people don't know this stuff is around."

A little more than two years ago Ballantyne decided to renovate his home—a converted 19th-century schoolhouse in Lansdale—using all environmentally friendly materials. When he had trouble tracking items down, he decided to open the Environmental Home Store, which he now runs out of his house. The store specializes in green building materials and sustainable design: bamboo flooring and butcher block, clay paints and recycled paper countertops, which are made by compress-

middle-class thing, and I'd really like to see it come down, because it's something that really everybody can do."

Neil Toensmeier, who's buying the house next to Larson's, says he won't be deterred by cost. "There's only so much money, so you save whatever you can, and then you make smart decisions where you're able to."

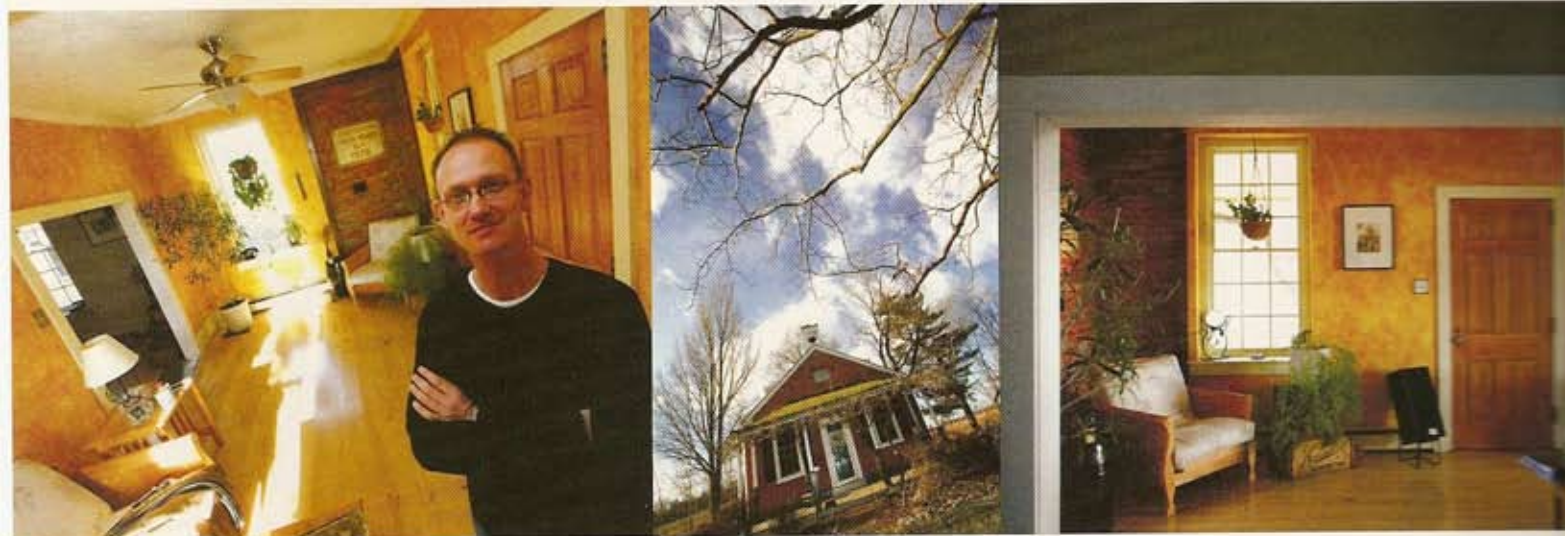
There's been a rising interest in green building nationally over the last couple of years, heightened by increased media coverage and the success of works like Al Gore's documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*. Much of the focus has been on cutting energy consumption with items like efficient appliances and light bulbs.

and what's not? There are a lot of choices to make."

The center also houses a heliodon, a machine that simulates the way sunlight hits different structures. For those building new homes, harnessing the natural power of the sun—simply by orienting the house correctly—can have a huge impact on energy consumption.

Builders have used this knowledge for hundreds of years, but as fossil fuels became cheaper, they began to ignore these techniques. "It's just stupid construction," Ballantyne says. "These new homes they build just aren't smart design."

For a long time cities like Seattle, Chicago



ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGE ECO-FRIENDLY HOMES LIKE TODD BALLANTYNE'S CONVERTED OLD SCHOOLHOUSE HELP MAKE PHILADELPHIA ONE OF THE GREENEST CITIES IN THE COUNTRY.

ing thin sheets of recycled paper with 60,000 pounds of pressure per square inch, creating a solid surface that looks and feels more like stone than paper.

Ballantyne says that though the expense of green building or renovating can be off-putting to certain people, the cost doesn't have to be prohibitive. "You do what you can, one room at a time, and collectively, if everybody's doing it, the benefits start to add up."

Antonio Larson just bought what he describes as a "shell" in West Philly. "I'm just trying to be as non-energy-dependent and use as much green material as possible," he says. While Larson has noticed a surge of interest in green building, he'd like to see more people getting involved. "It seems like an upper-

But Larson has found a lot more options out there. "It's a bit overwhelming for me putting all this together," he says.

Rob Fleming wants to work with people like Larson and Toensmeier. In 2002 Fleming, an architect, helped open the Sustainable Design Resource Center with a grant from the Sustainable Development Fund. The goal was to educate architects and designers, but there was one problem: "No architects came," Fleming says. "We were ahead of the curve in 2002, but now green construction has tipped, and we're getting a lot more customers."

The center offers free, short consultations. "We try to help people through the minefield of green out there. There are so many options that people can become frozen. What's green

and Portland, Ore., led the green-building trend nationally. But recently Philadelphia has come to the forefront of the green movement. The Delaware Valley Green Building Council, for example, hosts green-building workshops and meetings all over the area, and has acted as a driving force for sustainable living throughout the region. And at Rag Flats, a sustainable community in Fishtown, solar photovoltaic panels on the roof provide much of the power, and there's a 6,000-gallon cistern to collect rainwater.

"In the last two years Philadelphia has come forward as a leader in sustainable design and construction," says Fleming.

Ballantyne agrees: "Philadelphia is one of the greenest cities in the country." —