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Philly's BluPath Design Inc.'s owners use their row house and offices as a test run, prove their chops with a historic renovation, and now have their sights set on affordable housing

by Zach Baliva

BELOW: A custom fiber-optic chandelier illuminates the natural palette of the kitchen and dining area's walnut cabinets, blue granite counters, and slate and cherry radiant floors.

IT WAS A LEED SILVER PROJECT AT MGA PARTNERS THAT introduced Paul Thompson and Laura Blau to the world of sustainable design. There, the husband-and-wife team worked on the West Chester University Swope School of Music, a project that synthesized their growing interests in green principles. Now, the duo owns and operates BluPath Design Inc., a Philadelphia-based firm focused on sustainable design for affordable-housing, higher-education, and non-profit clients.

BluPath's first order of business was to renovate Thompson and Blau's own row house in South Philly. The update included eco-friendly touches—solar hot water, rainwater catchment, radiant flooring, and a rubber roof with white coating—that reduced energy use by 19 percent. "When we formed our own company and decided to pursue sustainable design, we started with our own house so we could experiment and learn practical aspects," Thompson says. Because BluPath works heavily on residential projects, it was important for the two to find ways to incorporate green elements and good designs in a residential setting. Their urban row house, Thompson says, was the perfect guinea pig.

A few years later, the team turned its attention to a newly purchased building that later would become BluPath's office. The two-story space was renovated and repurposed to hold offices on the lower level and first floor with an apartment above. Spray-foam insulation, a high-performance boiler, and energy-efficient windows are a few of the space's sustainable aspects. Blau laments their inability to include solar hot water—an adjacent building shades the roof—but the efficient boiler is sized for the entire building. The

LEFT: Large corner windows, sliding glass doors, and a skylight bring natural light to the master bath and adjacent office. Wood shower pallets, flush with the radiant slate floor, are comfortable for bare feet in winter. BELOW: BluPath Design partners, Laura Blau and Paul Thompson.

"We believe that beauty is also a sustainable quality, so we integrate the environmental and engineering aspects of green design with good architectural design."

—Laura Blau, Principal

design, Blau continues, provides a savings in utility costs for apartment residents, who don't have to pay for heating.

BluPath is proud of the building, which showcases the designers' ability to blend aesthetic and green qualities. "We believe that beauty is also a sustainable quality," Blau explains, "so we integrate the environmental and engineering aspects of green design with good architectural design."

As the mainstream continues to accept sustainable ideas, BluPath's principals are committed to growing in both skill and knowledge. "We have to retrain ourselves as professionals and as laypeople because we sometimes lack knowledge of our homes and of building science. People know more about what's under the hood of their car than what's in their own home," Blau says.

Thompson concurs: "The construction industry doesn't focus on energy savings and quality construction because energy has been so cheap for so long, but those

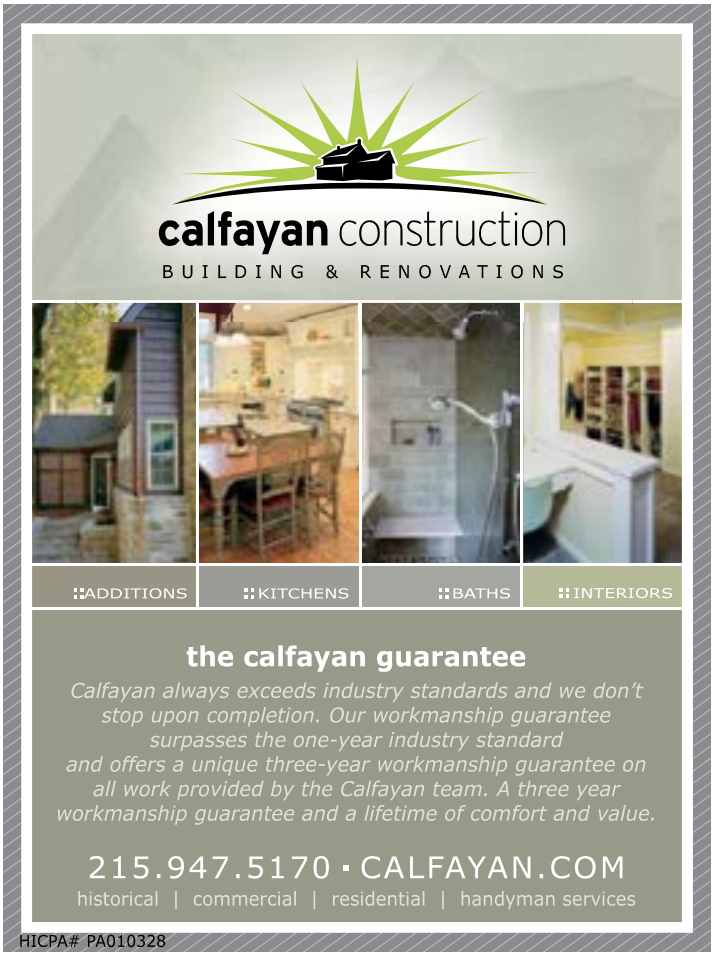
days are changing." Or perhaps gone for good. Now, builders are realizing they have to analyze maintenance and building costs.

Green Steps, a sustainable consulting company, is an extension of BluPath. With it, the team works to educate individuals and businesses on the merits of green design. In both companies, the colleagues promote passive-house ideals. "Americans get excited about equipment like solar PV, but that doesn't matter if your building isn't sealed. You're just throwing away solar energy instead of coal energy," Blau explains.

BluPath recently completed the renovation of a historic property in Philadelphia's Society Hill neighborhood. The house, built in 1787, is a registered historic building, and thus, BluPath worked closely with the Philadelphia Historic Commission. After multiple submissions, the building became the first historic home to be approved for photovoltaic panels on the roof. Thompson and Blau relied on 3D-modeling programs to help them determine the most inconspicuous location. Now, the panels are only visible from part of an adjacent walkway.

With one success under their belts and with the support of an enthusiastic owner, Thompson and Blau went back to the commission seeking approval to replace large custom and arched windows with double-insulated glass. "Buildings need to evolve and change with the times. If you can't improve energy use and bring an historic place up to a modern standard, the buildings will lose their value and disappear because nobody will be able to afford to live in them," Thompson says.

The owners of BluPath are often finding new ways to enhance their green interests. "We're trying to alter our lifestyles to match the energy properties of our own house," Thompson says. As a result of their personal efforts, the couple's energy and water use both have dropped and public transportation and car sharing has eliminated the need to own a car.

As homes and cars are the biggest contributors to one's carbon footprint, Thompson and Blau hope more people will modify their behavior. "When we make better choices about our resources, we all benefit," Blau says. For her and Thompson, the process has lasted almost a decade. The journey has shown that there exist many opportunities for change. The two have altered their business, their purchasing, their consumption, their food, and even their finances. As others look for ways to make similar choices, their advice is to start small. Most people, Blau says, begin with a few small changes and get excited about learning more, which ultimately leads to complete transformation. gb&d

RIGHT: The founders' renovated South Philly row home includes a white roof with solar hot water collectors, a rainwater catch system, and removable wood pallets over permeable gravel in the small garden.