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A blueprint for green living on Syracuse's Near West Side

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Stephen D. Cannerelli / The Post-Standard

Peter Waack and Maggie Maurer own a super-insulated green home, known as the R-House, on Otisco Street on Syracuse's Near West Side.

SYRACUSE -- Three space heaters. That's all it took to keep Maggie Maurer warm this past winter.

Her new home didn't have a heating system installed yet, so when Maurer moved into 619 Otisco St., on Syracuse's Near Westside, the builders loaned her three space heaters. This was the year the Farmers' Almanac named Syracuse the worst winter city in America. The same year the city saw 179 inches of snow.

"I moved into the house in November, and signed in January," she said. "If you live in Syracuse, you know how cold it gets."

Maurer got through the tough winter because of the design of the home, known as R-House. It was one of three winners of "From the Ground Up," a design competition for energy-efficient and affordable homes to fill in vacant lots and combat urban blight in the neighborhood just west of downtown.

Home HeadQuarters, a nonprofit housing agency, partnered with the **Syracuse Center of Excellence** and Syracuse University's School of Architecture for the project. When Maurer and boyfriend Pete Waack moved in, R-House went from concept to home.

An environmentally-friendly home was on the checklist for Maurer, a residential manager for Syracuse's branch of **GreenHomes America**, a national group dedicated to green living. She and Waack were considering a \$1 "Create Your Space" property, also through Home HeadQuarters, but realized it would be too much work.

"We had to do some finishing touches, but not many to this house," said Waack, business director for SU's student-run newspaper, The Daily Orange.

Already outfitted with green features, the home didn't need much else. The couple added EnergyStar appliances and low-flow toilets and faucets. Even the paint is green — not the color, but because it's a brand that does not emit Volatile organic compounds .

Key to the design, R-House was built to **German Passivhaus standards**, meaning it is so super-insulated and airtight it can be heated with the energy it takes to run a hair dryer. The walls and ceiling are padded with 16 inches of blown fiberglass insulation. A poured concrete floor acts as a "thermal mass" that store heat from the sun streaming in a large window at the back.

The couple said they have adapted to the 1,200 square-foot space. There are no closets, so the basement is a hybrid of a dressing room, laundry and storage space. There's also no garage, so Maurer and Waack park their cars in a nearby lot, or on the street.

And, though the house was fitted with a state-of-the-art heating system, there was no way to cool it in the summer. They installed a ductless, split air conditioner.

One of the bigger improvements Maurer and Waack have seen has been in the neighborhood, one of Syracuse's poorest. Waack said he takes a few minutes every day to pick up litter and trash on the sidewalk. People have noticed.

"One of our neighbors, one of the nicest ladies, she sweeps the street," he said. "She'll go all the way down the block. It's contagious."

The couple said they hope R-House inspires more growth in the area. Next door, at 621 Otisco, there's TED, another winner of the green home competition. On the other side, there's a home being renovated with the help of SU architecture students.

"We can see this area growing," Waack said. "And we wanted to be part of something changing."

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