

GREEN Awards

2011

Efficiency isn't just about faster output on the factory room floor, it's also about pooling resources and using every scrap in sight. With help from your nominations, we're recognizing six people—a fashion designer, an architect, an activist, a city worker, and two restaurateurs—who let nothing go to waste.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY TAYLOR CASTLE

ECO-BASH

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REPORTING BY DAVID BERNSTEIN, NORA O'DONNELL, LENA SINGER, CASSIE WALKER, AND JENNIFER WEHUNT

THE THOUGHTFUL DESIGNER

Nathan Kipnis

architect



WHEN NATHAN KIPNIS STARTS DESIGNING A new home, he doesn't look to the future, he quantum-leaps back to the past. To explain his philosophy, the Evanston architect, 49, pulls up an image of the thousand-year-old cliff dwellings of Mesa Verde on his computer and points to the dramatic stone overhang. "It shades the city from the high sun in the summer, and in the winter, the low sun can still heat up the city."

And while Kipnis's own designs reflect the wisdom of the pre-light-bulb era, they also have a distinctly modern profile. A vacation home in Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin, features a ventilation system modeled after that of the traditional American barn—only the ventilation tower is crafted out of glass, allowing the residents inside constant natural airflow as well as stunning views of Lake Michigan. On a corner lot in Glencoe, Kipnis is building a home that's in two sections, with two roofs. Together, the roofs mimic a funnel, collecting rainwater that can nurture a roof garden below or accumulate in flat rain barrels. Set at differing angles, the dual roofs also allow the house, like Mesa Verde, to bask in gentle winter rays but stay shielded from the searing summer sun. Meanwhile, solar thermal panels will harness energy when the sun is at its height. "If enough homes do this, the thought is that it offsets power production, which is a peak power load in the summer," he explains.

Kipnis's homes boast plenty of contemporary touches, too, such as high-efficiency furnaces, radiant floors, and low- to no-emission finishes, which don't give off harmful fumes. But it's his idea of rooting an entire aesthetic in sustainable principles that wins praise from fellow architects. "Before the advent of air conditioning, before electricity, everything that was built related to nature," says the architect Stanley Tigerman. "Nate understands that. He made a habit of it long before it was fashionable."

Kipnis's first solar home dates to 1983, when he was still a student at the University of Colorado-Boulder. The 1970s oil crisis loomed fresh in his mind, and he felt emboldened when early environmentalists, such as Amory Lovins, spoke on campus about their cause. Kipnis's concern over mankind's reliance on fossil fuels has prompted him to spend the past few years laying the groundwork for the first Midwest offshore wind farm, envisioned seven miles east of Northwestern University. The proposal has sparked controversy—detractors argue that the turbines will taint the Lake Michigan horizon, threaten birds, and whirl incessantly. But Kipnis, working pro bono with Citizens' Greener Evanston, thinks the farm's potential to passively power every household in his community, and then some, offers a monumental opportunity. "In the back of my mind, I have always known change is inevitable." —CASSIE WALKER