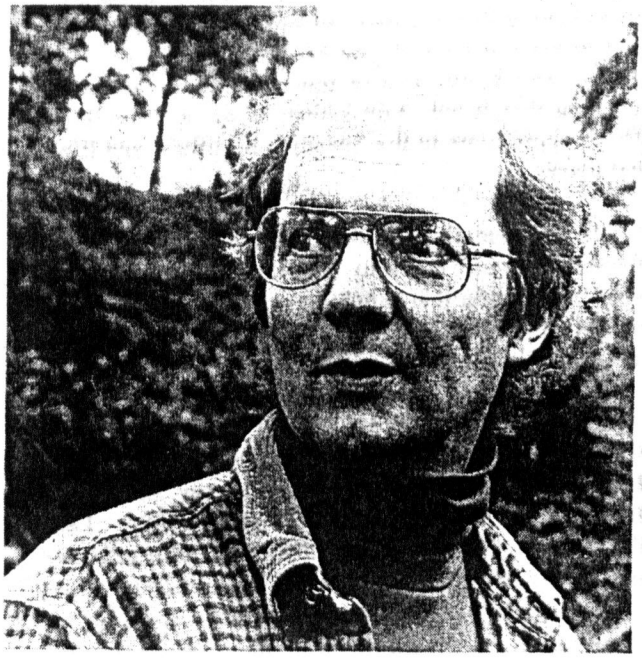
Sustainable Architecture
Interview with Tom Bender

Tom Bender is an architectual visionary who thinks long term and looks at changing the entire materials and energy picture of housing. His practical career reflects what he said twenty years ago, that energy use could be reduced by 90%. In a 1981 competition in California on Affordable Housing Designs, he did a study that found he could reduce housing costs by 90%. His clients, as well as his own family of 4, have had a better quality of life in the process. Straightening out physical designs reduces dependence on natural resources and energy. He also ties home and workplace together which eliminates unused space and cuts down on transportation costs.

He designs houses to focus on the inner quality of the occupants as well as to honor the materials he puts into a dwelling. Mirrors over the sink in his bathrooms are replaced with a window looking onto a beautiful garden. Detailing such as door knobs are made of things like knarled roots embedded with stone to remind one of the wood's life rather than sanding individual characteristics out of it. He gives his houses silence by removing motors such as refrigerators, furnaces, washers and dryers. Kitchens have thousands of dollars of cabinets and other fancies missing. Touches such as foot pedals on the floor for tap water save hot water, focus on the needs of the cook, and say something about making a good meal, and enjoying something good.

During our interview, he took us on a tour of his own 1200 square foot house to show us his approach of "enoughness" in architecture. The living room was oriented towards the sun. It opened up with sliding glass panals so it's as much like camping as possible. In the kitchen the refrigerator is replaced with an insulated cupboard that opens to the outside for its coolness. He uses natural materials in place of artificial ones such as formica. Having milled all the house wood on site from local sources, he used the leftover slab wood for the counter tops.

The house size was greatly reduced by making rooms multipurposeful. The master bedroom is a raised platform off the living room with sliding panel doors. It's literally a bed-room with huge wrap around windows onto the Pacific Ocean. Doors are open during the day providing additional lounging area for the living room and shut at night for sleeping. Linens and such are stored beneath the platform.



Tom Bender, Architect, Visionary, Community Advocate

We ate lunch in the dining room which is a raised platform in a window corner of the living room. We sat cross legged on the floor around a round table. On the kitchen side of the platform, chairs can be pulled up for those preferring chairs. Firewood is stored under the platform. A stairway to the upstairs and a rice paper shogi wall separate the living room from the entry keeping heat downstairs. All the space under the stairs is devoted to fine cabinetry for storage. The house is wood throughout.

Tom: "I think it's really vital that we do use wood in our buildings; that we do use old growth in our buildings. If we don't, it's like shunning somebody..... I don't say that we use old growth and cut it up into 2x4's .... but if we use just enough of it, so we're aware of what it is that has become so precious because there's so little of it left..... I think that's vital. Most of the wood we use in buildings is not old growth. ..... we made a floor for the upstairs and we oiled the bottom of it and we had a beautiful wood ceiling downstairs.... "

"... we aren't using any more wood than houses with wood substitute products use, because we build so small. We were using the 2nd growth. If we just adopted a sustainable enough forestry procedure so we are not over cutting. .....It's the most simple and direct way to provide.....

When you're sitting in a house on the coast here, in a 100-120 mph wind in the winter time and watching the

waves crashing against the salt cliffs of the mountain, watching a Sitka spruce whip back and forth in the wind, the only kind of thing that can survive that kind of wind in a direct impact and you see these products in your house, you know, you're touching that stone, you're touching that wood. You somehow get a lot closer to what's appropriate to the meaning of growth and life in that place.

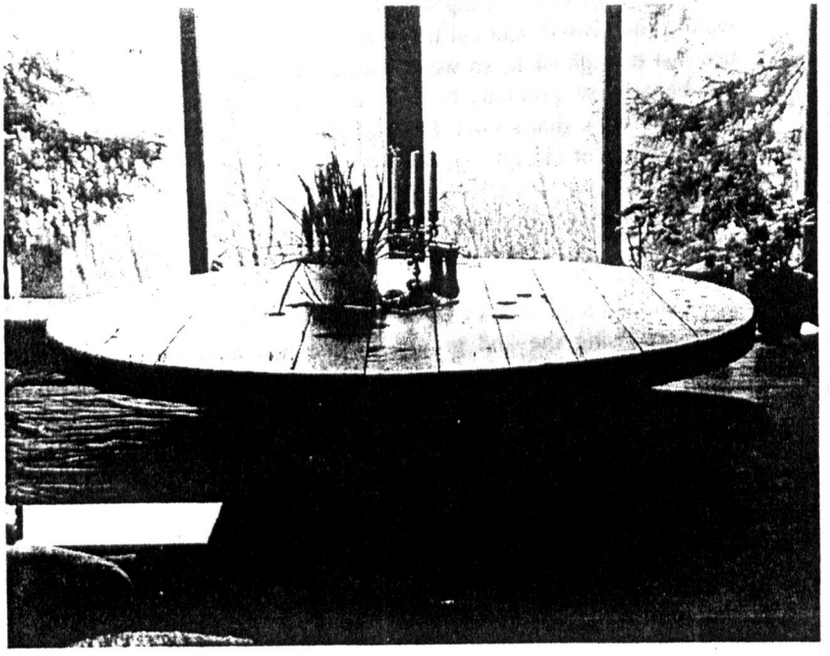
If you use something which is imported from Brazil, Indo-China, you've totally lost the sense of why, the sense of meaning that things have. And that's a whole dimension of our surroundings, of our lives that we almost totally ignore.

In any wealthy society all systems become incredibly wasteful. And this is not just an issue of how many resources they use, both material, energy and human resources, but it's also an issue of effectiveness. Let's take an example and say a wealthy society of people start building big living rooms. We don't acknowledge there is "too muchness"; that there is this huge space people have to walk across from the bedroom to the kitchen. It's like buying pants that are too big and keep falling down so we have to look at what a pattern is trying to accomplish. You know what a living room is for, what a kitchen is for, and find ways that fit the right size in the right way onto that."(end of quote)

Tom's homes release large amounts of resources and energy otherwise wasted. Yet he designs them to be generous, enriching, and supportive of their inhabitants. The bonus of this is it makes everyone more effective. He can be reached in Manzanita on the Oregon coast at (503)368-6294.

Corner of solar heated living room looking into master bed-room

Platform dining area is intimate



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