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The O'Neill Passive House: Cozy, comfortable and crazy efficient

The O'Neill Passive House, America's first passive house retrofit project, requires as much energy to operate as a standard hair dryer.

Wed, Oct 06 2010 at 8:43 AM EST

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Rendering: [Solar Knights Construction](#)

Super-efficient [passive houses](#) seem to be on the tip of everyone's tongues (and by everyone I mean those interested in [green building](#)). The American adaptation of European [Passivhaus standards](#) has gotten a good amount of play recently from being the subject of an [extensive article](#) in The New York Times to being a hot topic at both West Coast Green and the Urban Green Expo where the conference's theme, Pushing the Envelope, extended into educational sessions like "The Active State of Passive House: European Perspective on Implementation in North America."

Amidst all the chatter, work on a remarkable passive house, The [O'Neill Passive House](#), has just wrapped up in Sonoma, Calif. Built by [Solar Knights Construction](#) and designed by [LDG Architecture](#), the home has the distinction of being the first Certified Passive House in California *and* the first passive house retrofit project in the U.S.

The otherwise humdrum 2,400 square foot 60s-era home — [described](#) by owner Cathy O'Neill as a "hovel" — received an extensive, energy-efficient overhaul that

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included airtight construction, triple-glazed windows, high levels of insulation, passive solar design and an energy recovery ventilation system. All and all, the home consumes about as much energy as a standard hair dryer with monthly utility bills expected to be in the \$20 to \$30

range.



Because of the super-efficient building features listed above, the O'Neill Passive House home — just bestowed with "This Week's Green House" honors on Wendy Koch's [Green House blog](#) on USATODAY.com — is sans traditional heating or cooling units. It's also lawn-less with a water-smart yard filled with native plants and grasses.

O'Neill seems pleased as punch with the project in a recent [release](#):

I am thrilled with the house and I am so happy to have worked with a team of professionals who are so passionate and knowledgeable about passive house design. This house is not only highly energy efficient; it's also beautiful, inviting and comfortable. It really is an heirloom that I will be proud to pass down to the next generation.

O'Neill, a retired hedge-fund partner, [describes](#) her two-bedroom passive home to Koch as a "comfortable farmhouse with a modern twist" that provides "a smart, small answer to some very big problems and challenges facing the world today." However, it should be noted that this small, smart answer didn't come cheaply: the 18-month long project cost \$1.2 million to complete.

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As you can see in the above photos above, O'Neill's U-shaped, two-bedroom, 2.5 bathroom abode is anything but stark and a lot of care — thanks in part to interior designer Jann Blazona — obviously went into making the home a *home* and not the architectural curiosity that many perceive passives houses to be.

On that note, Beth from Solar Knights was kind of enough to point out — in the comments section of my [post from last week about passive houses](#) — four major misconceptions about passive houses that, along with cost, may hinder the stateside growth of this super-green building standard:


1. You have a super tight envelope and therefore can't open windows. Not true.
2. You can't have a northern view, i.e. windows. Not true.
3. You must build a small, utilitarian box. Not true.
4. You can't have a fireplace or hood over your stove. Not true.






[Read more](#) about the O'Neill House on the [USATODAY Green House blog](#) as well as well as at the [Solar Knights website](#). Additional photos of the completed home can be found [here](#). And for those of you in the Sonoma area, the home will be open for public tours on Oct. 23-24 with the team behind the project on hand to answer questions. Tickets cost \$25 and will benefit Habitat for Humanity of Sonoma County.

Via [[USATODAY Green House blog](#)], [[Solar Knights Construction](#)]

Photos: [Ned Bonzi Photography](#) via [Green House blog](#)

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