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GREEN LIVING COMES TO GRAND CAYMAN

Lighthouse Point combines style and conservation in its construction.

By John Hendel

Lighthouses have always intrigued Jay Easterbrook. As an environmental engineering college student of the University of Central Florida, he visited one at Daytona at least once a month. Back in the early 1980s, that lighthouse served as a landmark when he raced sailboats and as a romantic setting when picnicking. Today Jay, at 52 years old, still talks about lighthouses with quiet reverence, even after visiting 82 countries.

Starting this March, the Grand Cayman islander will be sleeping in a condo crafted by his own hands underneath another lighthouse, its white-stonework crest 52 feet above the high water mark of the west Caribbean waters and visible for up to 15 miles. The lighthouse is private now, decommissioned in Fort Myers back in 1992, but still shines a soft white light. The four family cats might even wander up the lighthouse's spiral staircase.

This past fall, Jay put his 23 years of experience to the test as he was building these nine condos around the lighthouse. The work called him to work 9-10 hour days, directing 20 to 40 men at the site. His wife Nancy, 54, is his partner in the project. She started the diving company Divetech on Grand Cayman in 1995 and has since attracted notables such as Mary Cheney and Tiger Woods. Jay spent the last six years working as a

dive bum with Nancy at the Divetech shop. Now they hope to add oceanfront condominiums to the mix.

“What are you going to name the place?” Nancy asked Jay early on in the project.

“No question. Lighthouse Point.”

Together the couple poured \$7 million (raised from personal finances, pre-construction condo purchases, and bank financing) into Lighthouse Point’s nine condos on the northwestern coast of Grand Cayman. They closed on the property back in July of 2007 and have been busy at work ever since. Owners will occupy the two-bedroom condos, ranging from 1421 to 2141 square feet each, starting in March 2009, with weekly rentals beginning in April. Customers have already bought five of the nine condos.

At the site, Jay and Nancy envision a bistro to provide casual meals, CAT-5 hurricane protection, and a new Divetech shop. More significantly, the couple wants an environmentally friendly edge to all construction. That green edge increased building costs roughly 25%, Nancy suspects, given features such as recycled concrete. The recycled concrete in particular costs \$40-60,000 more than standard stone. But Nancy thinks Lighthouse Point will earn that overall loss back in five years. The solar panels should reduce the condos’ electrical costs by 75%, they estimate, and the wind generator, low-wattage bulbs, gray water system, and rainwater cistern will also reduce energy costs over time. Nancy wants the consumer experience to be enhanced rather than hindered by environmentally friendly features.

“You don’t have to compromise the product or the amenities,” Nancy says.

Lighthouse Point is a member of the U.S. Green Building Council, and Jay and Nancy are working to achieve the council’s platinum LEED (“Leadership in Energy and

Environmental Design”) certification. As their Lighthouse Point plans materialized over a year ago, the couple began to frequent builders’ conferences in Florida and Georgia, learning how to optimize environmental features while reconciling limitations, such as the need to buy old-fashioned nails and screws. Educating both the work crew and the public at large has been the biggest challenge of green construction.

The complexity calls for extra attention—they wouldn’t want their sewage treatment plant connected with a kitchen faucet, after all—so Jay returned to construction with the Lighthouse Point site. Jay hates resorting to jackhammers due to errors; his 41 building projects on Grand Cayman taught him the value of getting the job done right and on time. Jay talks about “doing it right” often, whether it’s his job at Lighthouse Point or how the Cayman government treated building in the ’80s when Jay worked landfills. So many different environmental facets make the job complicated for subcontractors not used to juggling so many conservation methods and demand nuanced oversight.

“Every project I’ve ever built,” Jay says, “we were always trying to save every tree.”

He credits college with giving him an early appreciation of environmental concern. Some of his college research involved designing a plastic membrane for landfills and that sentiment carried over to his work, which ranged from hotels in Georgia to casinos in Cleveland. Nancy is concerned that people understand these benefits and realize why they can’t buy their own light bulbs. The level of explanation needed is “infinitely greater,” she says, seeming ready to help explain.

“We’re in the midst of an awareness era,” Nancy remarks. “We want to make this tangible to people.”