A Sustainability Advocate's Journey to LEED Platinum

By Erica Holthausen

ARCHITECT **Studio William Hefner** | GENERAL CONTRACTOR **Building Construction Group** | LEED SUSTAINABILITY CONSULTANT **Homage Design**

For actor and environmentalist Ed Begley Jr., sustainable living is second nature. As a child, his father taught him to save string and tin foil, turn out the lights, conserve water, and throw out as little as possible. Having lived through the Great Depression, Ed Begley Sr. abhorred waste. He died in April 1970, just a few days after the first Earth Day.

"My father was a good man and he cared about the environment," says Begley. "I got involved to honor my father as much as anything else. He always said, 'Eddie, don't just tell people what you're going to do, show them by doing it.'"

Begley began to walk, ride his bike, and rely on public transportation. He reused and recycled whatever he could and composted his kitchen scraps. He switched to biodegradable soaps and detergents and became a vegetarian. He found that the more he adopted environmentally friendly practices, the more money he saved.

After establishing his acting career as Dr. Victor Ehrlich on the television show *St. Elsewhere*, he bought a 1936 bungalow in the Studio City neighborhood of Los Angeles. "The walls were thick, but there was no insulation other than a bit of newspaper," says Begley. "I insulated the attic and walls and instantly saw lower gas and electric bills. Then I replaced the lightbulbs and the thermostat. Each time I saw more savings. When I got solar, my hot water and electric bills plummeted."

A few years later, he met Rachelle Carson. They married, had a daughter, and struggled to coexist in an old house with small closets and only one bathroom. Together they launched a reality television show. *Living with Ed* shared practical tips for green living but also revealed the ever-vigilant Begley trying to get his sometimes reluctant family to live up to his high environmental standards.

"Rachelle gets a lot of the credit for the show's success," says Begley. "I had produced a show earlier that was more technical. Rachelle introduced storytelling and became the everyman or everywoman—everyone could relate to her. Because of that, we reached millions of people who actually took action after watching the show. People would email us to let us know they got a rain barrel or switched to LED lights. They shared their stories with us, so we knew we were making a difference."

As the show drew to an end, the Begley family once again considered moving to a larger house. Their current home was as efficient as possible and Begley was intrigued by the potential of an even more energy-efficient home with a more robust solar photovoltaic system and a larger garden.

"For years I told Rachelle that I wouldn't move," says Begley. "But our daughter was almost a teenager and we were all sharing a bathroom. I also knew we had done as much as we could to make our old house energy efficient. I agreed to move if Rachelle could find a house in Studio City with a south-facing roofline. She found it within a week."

With site selection complete, the Begleys hired architect William Hefner to design a French Mediterranean home that would fit into the character of the neighborhood and hide the green technology. Scott Harris was brought on as the general contractor to oversee the building process and make sure the home would achieve Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Platinum.

To achieve LEED Platinum, a project must meet the requirements

ALL PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN LINDON

Left: Actor and environmentalist Ed Begley Jr. and his wife Rachelle Carson live by example when it comes to sustainability. Below: His southern California house is LEED Platinum.

> "If we were going to build a new home, I wanted it to be LEED Platinum. This is simply going to be the way that people build in the future. The time of waste is over. We can't waste water, electricity, natural gas—it's just not right, knowing what we know now, to waste anything."
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> **Ed Begley Jr.**, actor and activist

Top: Ninety-six percent of the building materials were either salvaged or recycled.

Right: A large yard offers a place for growing fruits and vegetables.

specified for every step of the building process—site selection and development, waste management, building orientation, community integration, sustainable landscaping, water conservation, renewable energy, material selection, and indoor air quality control.

"Our plan was to remodel the existing house," says Begley, "but it wouldn't support a second story and we needed the height to get enough sunlight for the solar panels. What started as a remodel was now a new build, and I was concerned about what we were going to do with the existing house. I didn't want to put it into a landfill."

Industrial Recycling Services dismantled the house piece by piece. The doors, windows, appliances, and fixtures were donated to Habitat for Humanity. Salvaged bricks and lumber were used to rebuild a church in Mexico. Ninety-six percent of the building materials were either salvaged or recycled.

"What I love about LEED is that they don't just look at the efficiency of the home once it's finished," says Begley, "they look at what you did while you were building it."

The Begley family moved into their home in 2016. "I'm very fortunate and grateful to be able to build such an environmentally friendly home," says Begley. "But when I first started, I focused on the simple things. Start small. If your electric company offers an energy audit, start there. Get a rain barrel to collect rainwater, install warm LED lights and dimmers, get an energy-saving thermostat, and put in weather stripping. These little things all add up and you'll see the savings after your first billing cycle." ●

LOCATION: **LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA**

SIZE: **3,800 SQUARE FEET**

LEED CERTIFICATION: **PLATINUM**

LEED POINTS AWARDED: **94.5**

PROJECT START DATE: **2011**

COMPLETION DATE: **2016**

SUSTAINABILITY FEATURES

- Passive solar design
- Recycled-steel frame
- Lutron shading system
- 9-kilowatt solar photovoltaic system
- Tesla Powerwall
- ENERGY STAR appliances
- Lutron LED lighting system
- Solar hot water system
- Graywater recycling system
- ACT D'MAND hot water distribution system
- Drought-tolerant landscape
- WaterSense showerheads, faucets, and high-efficiency toilets
- Hot Sun Industries Powerstrip solar pool heater
- Extensive fruit and vegetable gardens
- 10,000-gallon rainwater catchment system

FUN FACTS

Ninety-six percent of the existing house was recycled or reused. Most of the fixtures and appliances were donated to Habitat for Humanity, while the bricks and lumber were used to repair a church in Mexico.

The initial stages of finding a site, hiring an architect and general contractor, and deconstructing the old house were documented on the 2013 web series *On Begley Street* and the 2014 webcast of *Our Green House*.

In addition to the vegetable gardens and fruit orchard, the landscape features drought-tolerant shrubs like ceanothus, toyon, lavender, and sage.