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True Green

SCOTT RODWIN, AIA, RODWIN ARCHITECTURE AND SKYCASTLE CONSTRUCTION
BOULDER, COLORADO



Scott Rodwin, AIA

Scott Rodwin, AIA, is an architect, but his No. 1 mantra in the design and construction business is “respect the builder.” Maybe that’s not

such a surprise because, in addition to his architecture firm, Rodwin Architecture, he owns a construction company called Skycastle Construction. Together, the 12-person design-build firm achieves a high standard of sustainable residential work that Scott says would be very difficult to accomplish without providing both pieces of the puzzle.

The company builds within a radius

of about 1½ hours of its base in Boulder, Colorado, an area that’s benefited and suffered from an extended housing boom. Delivering construction services was key to the company’s survival during the last downturn, but it’s also essential to its success today, when building talent is in such short supply.

“The cost of building is sky high,” Scott explains. “And that’s because in the great recession we lost a lot of skilled tradespeople. Since then demand has consistently increased. Also, the quality of the houses has ratcheted up. It used to be that the rules were very relaxed in certain areas, and less skilled workers built lower-quality houses.”

Boulder has long been a stronghold of tough green building standards, but surrounding areas are catching up and, at the same time, buyers are demanding better houses. “Now, as people have moved from the coast and brought higher expectations, they’ve pushed the design quality and construction quality,” says Scott. “Fifteen years ago, very few people were doing pier construction, which is essential with our clay soils. Today, we’re seeing a lot of cracking in those houses—cracking foundations, porches that sink or rise, garages that crack.”

When Scott founded his architecture firm in 1999, he was an early apostle of sustainable residential de-



Previous page: Rodwin Architecture and Skycastle built Gunung Mas as a passive and active solar ranch house. Edge House (left) attained LEED platinum. Deck House (above) is another Rodwin/Skycastle design-build.

sign. In 2020, he says, every house in Denver will have to meet the equivalent of LEED Gold. “Ten years ago, we were out there on the fringe. There were architects who had green building in their DNA, like James Cutler, but they weren’t concerned with certifications at the time. In the green building world, the saying goes, ‘you get what you verify.’ The architects and builders who led the way in green design insisted on verification and certification to keep the bar high.”

Scott has been an important one of those leaders. In the early years of his architecture-only firm, he made it a point to attend every reputable conference on sustainability he could find. By the turn of the millennium, his firm was winning local and regional awards for green design and he was teaching others how to do it right. Every time a project garnered attention for design, he insisted upon discussing its high-performance aspects. He documented them on the website as well, in great detail. “We had beautiful wrappers, but they contained energy-, water-, and material-conserving measures. We got good at telling that story.”

Edge of Tomorrow

A significant turning point came when Scott accepted the commission for Edge House. It was both a commission and a challenge, he recalls. “It was in 2007, and it changed everything for us. The client called us up from Germany and said, ‘You are going to design a house for us.’ His brief to us was, ‘I want a house that is a model of sustainability. I have reviewed your green building codes,

“I have reviewed your green building codes, and I laugh at them.”

—a Rodwin client

and I laugh at them. I want this house to be the greenest house in America.”

Scott, who had educated himself on everything from straw-bale to net-zero, was happy to accept the challenge—especially with a shaky economy looming on the horizon. The design came together nicely, but, midway through construction, the first builder began to self-destruct. “He was a criminal,” says Scott. “A criminal who actually went to jail. The owner fired

him.” Another builder finished the job.

This experience spurred Scott to start his own construction company. “Here we had this great house on the verge of being destroyed by a bad contractor. And I already had folks in my office who dreamed of the design-build, master-builder model. I even had a guy in my firm, Brandon David, who had started as a builder and then become an architect. It was 2008 and work was running out. I turned to Brandon and said, ‘we either have to do more on the buildings we do, or we have to let people go.’” Brandon, who has degrees in architecture and environmental design, was gung-ho, and is now Skycastle’s co-owner and general contractor.

Get There First

Once finished, Edge House gained traction fast. It achieved LEED Platinum, won Green Home of the Year from the Colorado Home Builders Association, First Place in the Colorado Residential Sustainable Design Awards, in addition to great coverage in the mainstream press. The timing was perfect for the new design-build firm to capitalize on the exposure. And the Skycastle team

focused fast on getting up to speed.

“We worked hard to build the best construction company and to integrate it really well with the architecture firm,” says Scott. “It was profitable right out of the gate, and it gave us control of the design from start to finish. The quality is higher, and the most surprising thing is the liability went down.

“The scariest thing about design-build is that it’s two entirely different professions. You have to have respect that fact,” Scott warns. “So, whenever we didn’t know something, we hired somebody who did. We hired supers with 30 years of experience. It’s a lot cheaper to pay them than to be sued. We pick up mistakes before they get in the field and correct them. We’ve never been sued because we fix things quickly.”



Wedge House is a design-build remodel of a 1973 ranch, resulting in a high-performance house with geothermal heating and photovoltaics.

What Scott’s firm does is no longer “fringe,” and competition is growing. Still, he’s way out in front, with two decades of experience, achievements, and market reputation. He’s led with design, backed it up with construction chops, and infused it with concern for the environment and the well-being of his clients.

He’s designing and building true green homes that he hopes will become as commonplace as organic food, once also a fringe item. Says Scott, “Green building has been running a parallel course to organic food. And now every Kroger and Safeway has an organic food section, which helps bring prices down. I’m optimistic green building will become more affordable and accessible before too long.” —S. Claire Conroy

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