

An outhouse out of the ordinary

By Molly Millett

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Outhouses can be about more than just ... you know.

"I thought it would be fun to build an outhouse that was almost a piece of sculpture,"

said John Sylvestre, a remodeler who is renovating his lake property in Wisconsin.

"An outhouse doesn't have to be an afterthought."

Sylvestre, who is trained as an architect, was inspired by his great uncle's outhouse.

"Instead of this smelly, scary, mice-infested hole, as they sometimes are, visiting it was an enjoyable process because it was a pleasant place," Sylvestre said. "He was a woodworker, and I remember it had this paneled pine interior."

Sylvestre didn't need to build an outhouse. His cabin has three bathrooms.

"A cabin should have some rustic things. You should do things there you don't ordinarily do, and an outhouse provides this opportunity," Sylvestre said. "Also, I'm a remodeling contractor. I spend my life fixing things. I like the idea of having something extremely simple where the only moving parts are the toilet seat and the door, so you don't have to ever fix anything, and if you lose power, it still works."

Yet, Sylvestre researched the design of this simple structure as thoroughly as he would a whole-house remodel for Sylvestre Construction Inc., of Minneapolis.

"The University of Minnesota Extension Service Web site actually has a lot of ideas and background information to help you design an outhouse, so we could make sure we included all of the functional things it should have, like proper ventilation, and then we overlaid it with this artistic fabric."

But Sylvestre didn't just print some instructions off the Internet when it came to designing and building the perfect outhouse.

"I made a study model out of cardboard and then a full-scale model in my driveway to make sure my ideas would work," Sylvestre said.

What did the neighbors think?

"They all thought I was nuts. They still do, but that's OK," he said, laughing.

And his wife?

"She just let me go," Sylvestre said. "She knew I was on a roll."



The outhouse, located on his property near Danbury, Wis., is a green jewel that sparkles in the woods with its sloped copper roof, yellow door and red window trim.

"Part of the whole idea of using color is that we tend to be bland here in the Midwest, and we didn't want the outhouse to be bland," Sylvestre said.

Its interior is finished with natural pine and recycled fir and includes a bookshelf and plenty of light from all the windows.

"The windows were important, because the common complaint you hear about outhouses is the smell," he said. "We wanted to eliminate that problem."

So the prospect of visiting his outhouse is not an unpleasant one.

"It makes it fun to walk down the path when you have a certain task to complete," Sylvestre said.

The project won a 2008 National Association of the Remodeling Industry Regional Contractor of the Year Award for Residential Exterior Specialty. But for the remodeler, an award wasn't the best part of the process.

"Running a business, working in an office, I don't get to spend a lot of time working with tools, and so this project meant I could get outside to work. I could work with tools, and I could purchase more tools," he said.

Despite the indoor plumbing on the property, the outhouse has gotten plenty of use.

"The outhouse became our only functioning toilet facility while we were remodeling the cabin," Sylvestre said.

He said he's approaching the rest of the renovations and construction on his lake property differently.

"After playing with every angle and custom everything for the outhouse, I've taken a much simpler approach with the cabin and the garage and bunkhouse," he said. "I satisfied my creative energies on the outhouse."

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