

Power to the People!

The family wanted solar panels, but the local board said no—and a pitched battle ensued



No one wanted a fight...

The 9,000-plus square-foot Tudor home that my clients were building in Scarsdale, New York, was beautiful by any standard. With its Indiana limestone façade, the six-bedroom structure on nearly an acre of land could only enhance the neighborhood where we broke ground early in 2006. This area of ranch houses is gradually shedding its modest look as owners demolish or expand the existing houses, built mainly in the 1950s.

But the beauty was more than skin deep. While the new two-story edifice had Old-World charm to spare, it also had a state-of-the-art design that would make it a model of clean-energy technology. The house would be heated and cooled by a complex geothermal system: Six wells, drilled in the front yard, snaked down 300 feet into the thermal layer, to water naturally warmed by the earth. The floors inside the house, whether made of hardwood or tile, were radiant-heated. The insulation was cutting-edge, an efficient Icynene foam, and the windowpanes were treated glass.



Yet when the time came to put in the panels last fall, the project came to a halt. Incredibly, members of the community thought the panels would be too hard on the eyes. In a petition to Scarsdale's Board of Architectural Review, a group of my clients' neighbors—including doctors, lawyers, and other presumably well-informed professionals—argued that the panels "would clearly be an eyesore in our lovely Quaker Ridge neighborhood." With that letter in hand, and in spite of the fact that New York State had passed legislation granting tax incentives for solar installations, on November 24 the BAR denied my clients' application by a vote of 4 to 2. Among its reasons, the board cited the possibility of glare and claimed that the panels were "not in keeping with the character of the neighborhood."

But we were not about to give in. My clients believed that the BAR had acted improperly and had not evaluated their application "on its own merits." Resolving to pursue the issue further, we rallied local environmental groups, who were equally bewildered and outraged by the board's negative decision. The owners of the home then called their local representatives, wrote and circulated a petition of their own, collected 107 signatures, and submitted it to the BAR. They also paid some \$20,000 in legal fees and delayed-construction costs.

Finally, three months later, on February 5, 2007, the board reversed its decision by a squeaker of 4 to 3 and approved my clients' plan, with a small caveat: The owners would plant a row of evergreen trees on the edge of their property to further screen the panels' view from the street. It was a clear ecological victory that, I hope, will open the door for other "green-machine" homes. My clients commended the BAR "for doing the right thing, for our home, our community, and our environment." Added *The Scarsdale Inquirer*, with an uncharacteristically poetic flourish, "... we're starting to write an 'Ode to a Photovoltaic Cell'."

— Rob Knorr is the principal of Nordic Construction, Inc., founded in 1985 and based in Pound Ridge, New York. Nordic specializes in Norman-style and Tudor-style homes that join traditional style and technique with a strong environmental ethic. Nordic is an ENERGY STAR Builder, in partnership with the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority.



Moreover, the electricity to run the system would come from solar energy—an array of 30 full-size and 12 half-size 9.3 kW photovoltaic panels mounted on the rear of the steep, south-facing black slate roof, in an indented portion flanked by two wings. The panels were to be set tight to the roof, parallel to the roofline. It was a virtually perfect application of solar panels: they were not readily visible from the street. And, of course, there would be no furnace and no burning of fossil fuels for warmth.

The pioneering panels were to be the first use of solar technology in this community, where the median home price, according to *Money* magazine, is \$1,522,918. To Scarsdale's credit, the town has had a reputation not just as an enclave of affluence but also as a place where the quality of its surroundings was a top priority. "Scarsdale has always prided itself not only on its beautiful homes, but on its sensitivity to environmental concerns," stated *The Scarsdale Inquirer* in an editorial on November 24, 2006. "As long ago as the 1960s," the weekly paper noted with pride, "the [former] village was in the forefront of recycling and composting efforts, and Scarsdale schools have recently embarked on an ambitious 'go green' effort...."