

# Contractor 'tucks in' the green



Stephanie Saerest | East Bay Business Times

Canyon Construction is turning the Moraga Barn — a former bar and the town's oldest building — into its new headquarters.

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**F**ifteen years ago, Chris Avant began working for Canyon Construction as a carpenter. He spent nine years working his way up in the company. Then he set down his tools, took off his work boots and

took a seat in the office.

Nine years later, Avant bought the business and has watched it grow 10 percent annually over the past five years. He has distinguished himself by offering clients his expertise as a LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) accredited professional.

The company has completed a variety of residential and commercial projects, including the renovation of historic Fort Ross, which was built in the early 1800s on the Sonoma coast, and the Canyon post office, but its mainstay is residential construction. Under Avant's leadership, the company has grown to complete about 25 partial and full home renovations and one or two new custom homes a year.

Avant strives to build homes that are contemporary and well designed with the green aspects tucked in. For example, for some roofing projects, small solar panels that resemble traditional roof shingles can present an energy-saving aspect to a house without the look of the bulky solar panels more regularly installed on rooftops.

In remodeling and building custom homes, Canyon uses green materials for almost every detail. The countertops they recommend for kitchens are mostly made of recycled concrete or recycled glass. The flooring options they suggest include bamboo or cork or wool carpets. Even the paint on the walls is a low-VOC type.

Although building and remodeling homes is the company's main emphasis, the biggest project on Avant's mind these days is the renovation of the Moraga Barn, which will soon be the new headquarters of Canyon Construction. The Barn, a former watering hole and community gathering spot, is the oldest building in Moraga and was originally built early last century as a hotel. It later became a bar. After the building had been vacant and unused for several years, Avant approached the owners. Now, Canyon Construction is renovating the historic structure and making it green.

"We are going for LEED platinum status," Avant said of the Barn. "I feel we will comfortably get into that level." The concrete being poured for the renovation is a mixture of 25 percent slag (a byproduct of the steel industry), 25 percent fly ash and 50 percent actual concrete. The "new" Barn will also feature a large outdoor space where Avant plans to host community gatherings, including film screenings and other events that focus on earth-friendly topics.

Canyon Construction was founded by Deva Rajan in 1966 in Canyon, a tiny town hidden in the redwoods on the Moraga side of the Oakland hills. Rajan remains the company's chairman. An early advocate of sustainable construction, he produced a sod roof and used reclaimed materials on his home in 1969.

"I think he saw the beauty in it (sustainable design)," Avant said. "But he was also building his house on what he could afford as a carpenter. People protect and take care of things of beauty. If you think of beauty in terms of quality and craftsmanship, that's what we stand for."

Avant grew up with environmentalist values. His father worked as a park ranger and raised children who respected nature. Well aware that construction is an industry that creates high levels of pollution, Avant, when he took over at Canyon, went about making the business as green as possible. He hired a consultant from Herman Miller to study the business — from the offices to the construction sites — and make suggestions about how to be more earth friendly.

As a result, the company's nearby "yard" is surrounded by a garden maintained by local school and community groups. The business manages waste in renovation projects by deconstructing as much as possible and donating usable building materials to nonprofits, which also gives the client a tax write-off.

Wood purchased by Canyon Construction is primarily engineered lumber, or it meets standards set by the Forest Stewardship Council, an international nonprofit organization that guarantees products are from responsibly managed forests. Finally, the company's fleet of trucks and other vehicles run on biodiesel, as does Avant's personal car.

Avant believes that earth-friendly construction will become more common in the near future. He even predicts that codes will be rewritten to require it, forcing the competition to institute sustainable practices.

"It's a distinguishing factor for our company," Avant said. "But I don't think it will be in five years."

## Canyon Construction

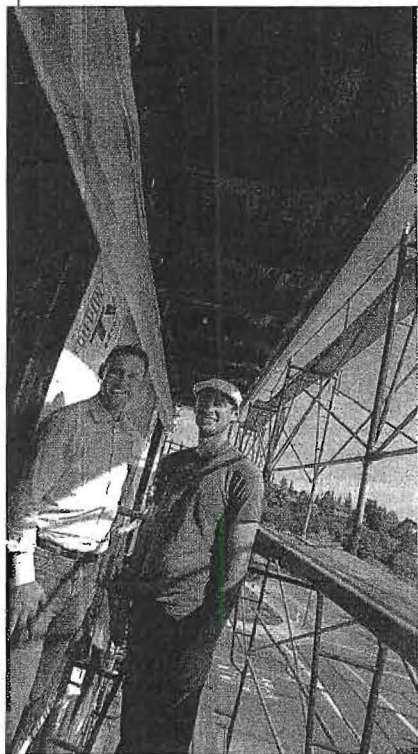
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Chris Avant and Jeremy Fisher of Moraga's Canyon Construction.