

# BLOOMhouse: a zero net energy house

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**ABSTRACT:** The 2007 University of Texas Solar Decathlon House is called the BLOOMhouse because it represents the “seed” of new ideas for zero net energy housing. The University of Texas student team developed a prefabricated 7.9 kW stand-alone solar-powered modular house that sits lightly on the land and forms the superstructure for photovoltaic technologies and a sustainable approach to the building envelope. The prefabricated house can be adapted to a specific site and modified for the needs of a different site within a different climatic zone, and client context. Recognizing that consumers look to Solar Decathlon entries for ideas of how to integrate renewable energy technologies into their own homes this house will serve as a working example to homeowners, homebuilders, and architects.

The Solar Decathlon is an international initiative and University competition sponsored by the U.S. Department of Energy, designed to stimulate research, industry and education to advance renewable energy technologies, with a specific focus on building-integrated photovoltaics. Now entering its fourth cycle, the Decathlon provides a unique opportunity to envision, fabricate and test the possibilities of highly efficient modern dwellings. Our team of architecture and engineering faculty and students under the direction of Professor Michael Garrison, Professor Samantha Randall, Professor Atila Novoselac, and Lecturer Russell Krepart constructed a completely stand-alone solar-powered home that serves as a catalyst for change, leading the residential housing industry toward more sustainable practices while addressing the need for well designed, appropriately diverse, economically viable, and environmentally responsible housing. Through use of solar power and energy efficient design, this project offers homeowners the means to directly participate in the energy economy, moving from energy consumers to energy producers.

Conference theme: Green and sustainable architecture

Keywords: photovoltaics, solar design

## INTRODUCTION

The Solar Decathlon competition occurs every two years and is run by the National Renewable Energy Laboratory, which requires a portable structure of a fairly modest scale, with a dual prescription for both exhibition and inhabitation. The Program calls for the design to appeal to the normal modern American lifestyle of the general public -- the solar decathlon house is designed to support all the power needs of a typical household, including lighting, cooking, heating and cooling, and telecommunications. There should also be enough energy remaining to charge an electric vehicle for getting around. The competition requires the construction of the home "offsite". It should have a maximum dwelling footprint of 800 square feet, suitable for two people and mobile, so that it can be transported for a temporary exhibition "village," on the National Mall. The home has to be installed in four days, occupied and tested during the competition and then subsequently removed and shipped back to Austin. The University of Texas has participated in the competitions in 2002, 2005 and 2007.

The new rules for the 2007 Solar Decathlon competition added “market viability” as another part of the contest. Jurors assessed how well and easily the house could be brought to market and also whether the house had market appeal, is livable, has a flexible layout and is affordable. To respond to the requirement for a broad-based market appeal the 2007 UT Solar D team adopted an interdisciplinary approach. Although the student-led team remained under the Architecture, it also included a diverse partnership of faculty leads from different disciplines from Engineering, Marketing, and with Advisory Council of business and industry professionals. In response to “market viability” the team developed a 7.9 kW PV array with a skin-based design strategy that responds to orientation, climate and culture.

## 1. DESIGN

The 14-foot-wide x 50-foot-long streamlined, singlewide design was determined based upon shipping dimensions and speed of construction.

The BLOOMhouse is constructed of 6" thick Structurally Insulated Panels (SIP's) with an R-24 insulation value that reduces heating and cooling loads to 1 ton per 960 square feet. Metal-faced SIPs perform structurally as stress skin panels, and act as a thermal and moisture barrier.

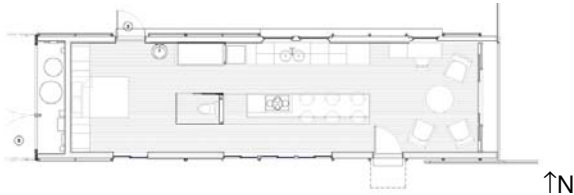


Figure 1: Open floor plan of the BLOOMhouse

Because the house is made using lightweight, metal-faced SIPs as a single airtight envelope, the infiltration load was reduced to less than one-half of air change per hour. An Energy Recovery Ventilator (ERV) was incorporated into the house to ensure adequate amounts of fresh air.



Figure 2: South Elevation Bloomhouse (photo by NREL)

The photovoltaic panels, together with a steel carriage form a butterfly roof-shading device. The PV panels are mounted in racks of 5 over the flat roof to speed up on-site deployment time. These racks are supported on vertical steel frames on the north and south façade of the house. The steel frames are called "moment frames" which pick up lateral forces on the long sides of the house and allow for the elimination of interior shear walls to achieve an open free flowing spacious plan arrangement. The openness of the design simultaneously facilitates daylighting, effective cross ventilation and a fluid indoor/outdoor relationship with the outdoor decks that surround the house. As a consequence a house of a fairly modest scale appears large and spacious.

The house was prefabricated by the student team headed by Alex Miller under the construction direction of Russell Krepert in a hangar at the old Mueller Airport in Austin. The house was shipped by truck to Washington, D.C. as a wide-load transport and modified on the National Mall using a system of

hydraulic jacks. On site labour was reduced in this design scheme to the installation of the solar collectors and landscape decking.

The energy-saving features of the house integrate strategically placed shading devices, cross ventilation, daylighting, advanced Energy Star appliances, and LED lighting prototypes. Solar systems include a 7.9 kW PV system and an evacuated tube solar hot water heating system with a warm floor heating system that discharges excess heat into a hot tub. The excess energy from the 7.9 kW PV system is used to charge an electric vehicle with a goal of meeting the needs of commuters who put as many as 19,000 miles a year on their vehicles.



Figure 3: BLOOMhouse interiors (photos by Alex Miller)

## 2. ENERGY DESIGN AND ANALYSIS

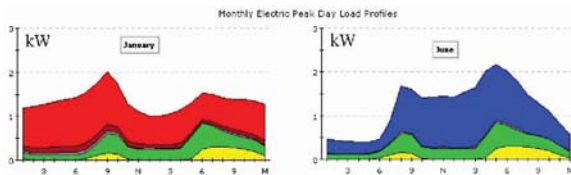
The engineering student team led by Professor Atila Novoselac performed an energy analysis using several software packages. The software included, DOE2, PV-F-Chart and PV-DesignPros-S. The software was used to model window and shading devices, wall and ceiling structure and material properties, air infiltration/ventilation rates, thermal mass and building daylight and energy performance.

The results of the analysis showed that double-pane windows limited to 25% of total wall area and with a reflective coating, shading device (SHGC = 0.2) and exterior architectural shading devices on east and south facades optimized energy use performance.

Parametric analyses showed the optimum R-value of the walls that were specified for the BLOOMhouse to be 25 h.ft<sup>2</sup>F/Btu. This corresponds to a 6" structural insulated panel. Analysis showed that additional increases could lead to an increase in interior temperatures due to internal sources of heat gain.

The effect of infiltration and/or ventilation rate on energy use was also studied. For the selected windows, shadings devices, and R-value, for the BLOOMhouse the air exchange rate was reduced to .35 air changes per hour. In order to minimize the air quality problems for a house this airtight a mechanical

energy recovery ventilation (ERV) system was added to assure adequate amounts of interior fresh air. Because the BLOOMhouse needed to be lightweight, in order to be transported to the National Mall, thermal mass was reduced in the use of construction materials while relying on a solar hot water powered "warm floor" to achieve radiant heating during winter conditions. Additional analysis indicated that lower exterior surface absorption for walls affected annual energy consumption. Therefore light colored exterior surfaces with an absorption index between 0.8 to 0.4 were specified. These energy conservation measures, coupled with energy star appliances, an energy-efficient lighting load of .5 W/sf, and a mini-split Heating, Ventilation and Cooling (HVAC) system, determined that the peak HVAC load would be less than 2 kW in order for the BLOOMhouse to meet the competition's strict comfort zone design requirements of 72° - 76°F and a relative humidity (RH) of 40-55%.



- Red- Heating
- Blue-Cooling
- Green-Appliances
- Yellow-Lighting

Figure 4: Energy Load of the BLOOMhouse

### 2.1 Solar Hot Water System

Evacuated-tube solar collectors provide the energy for the water heating for the kitchen, bathroom, dishwasher, clothes washer and the warm floor heating system. This system requires two tanks (40 gallon and 120 gallon capacity) for hot water storage and a control system that regulates the energy flow in-between these two tanks. For Austin, Texas evacuated tubes positioned on the roof, with an area of 60 square feet, provide enough energy to heat the domestic hot water needs during the year and provide additional energy for warm floor heating during the heating season. Total annual savings of electrical energy is reduced from 7340 kWh to 6560 kWh, therefore: the annual savings of electrical energy attributed to the "warm floor" heating is estimated to be 780 kWh for Austin, Texas.

### 2.2 Solar PV System

Roof-mounted photovoltaic panels are oriented towards the south with a tilt angle of 18°. This low tilt angle was determined by the Solar Decathlon competition requirements, related to the height of the house. The PV system consists of 42 BP Solar photovoltaic panels. The efficiency of the panels is 15.1% resulting in a maximum power output of 7.9 kW. The photovoltaic panels convert light directly into electricity which is sent to a controller which distributes the energy between

storage in a battery bank, used to charge the car, or used to run the loads of the house. The system is connected to four SMA Sunny Boy Inverters, which are used to convert the DC electric power from the photovoltaic array to AC power required to run household appliances. The battery bank was sized to store enough electricity for 5 consecutive "dark days". Approximately one-third of the PV power system is used to power the house and two-thirds of the PV power system is used to charge the battery car.



Figure 5: BLOOMhouse Mechanical Systems

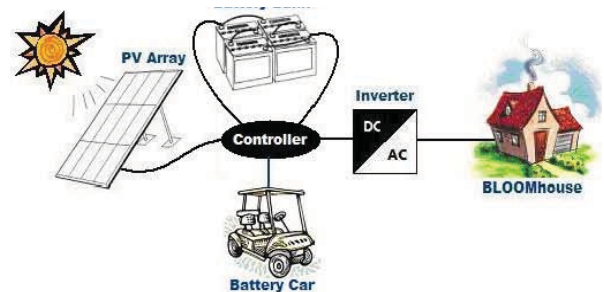


Fig. 6: Photovoltaic power system

### 2.3 Operation

The house maintained comfort conditions throughout the competition and the University of Texas Team placed 10<sup>th</sup> in the overall competition out of twenty teams. The University of Texas team placed 2<sup>nd</sup> overall in Engineering, was 3<sup>rd</sup> overall in the Comfort Zone portion of the competition and placed 1<sup>st</sup> in the solar hot water competition. The University of Texas team won a special award for being the first team on the National Mall to have their house operational and also won the BP Solar Award, for the solar decathlon house that demonstrated the best overall integration of photovoltaic roof panels.

After the competition on the Mall, the house was disassembled and shipped back to Austin, Texas. It was eventually shipped on to McDonald Observatory near Ft. Davis, Texas where the house was reconstructed on the Mount Locke site of the Millimeter Wave Telescope. The BLOOMhouse is being used for staff housing and to power scientific experiments. Future plans include a display at the Frank N. Bash

Visitors Center to feature information on the BLOOMhouse, and solar energy. The combination of the solar water system and the 7.9 kW PV system enables the completely off the grid, stand alone house to remain within the comfort zone, in Washington D.C. Austin, Texas and at McDonald Observatory.

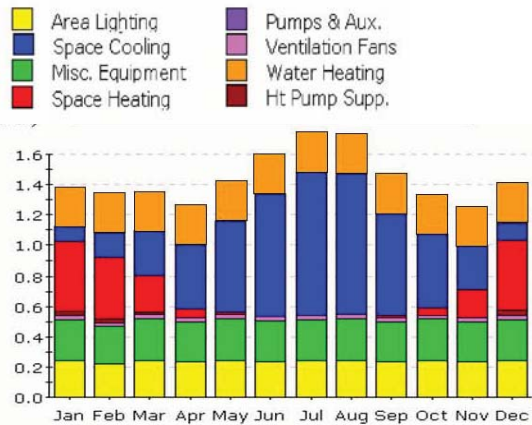


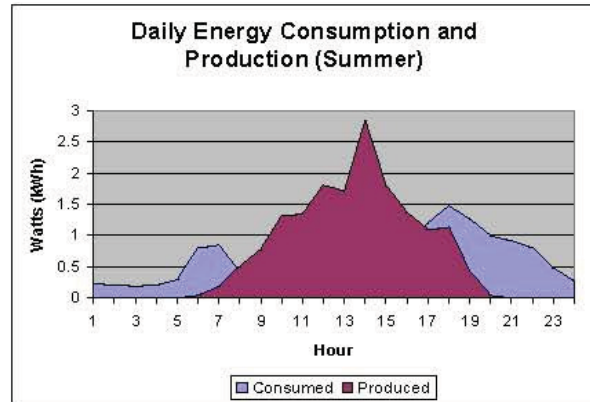
Figure 7: Annual Energy use (kWh) for the BLOOMhouse

### 3 PERFORMANCE

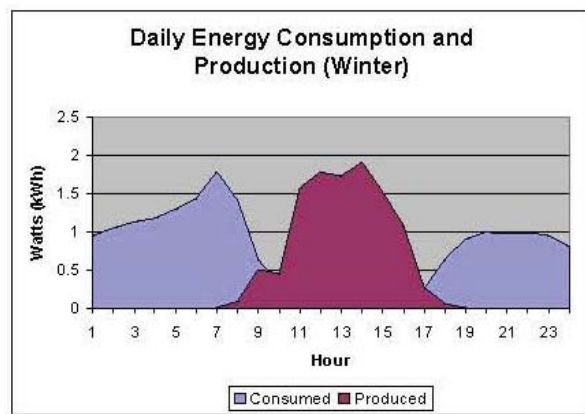
The performance of the BLOOMhouse established that a well-designed 7.9 kWh PV powered house could adequately meet the energy demands of the modern American lifestyle, in Washington D.C., Austin, Texas and in Ft. Davis, Texas. The house receives enough PV power to run the entire house, and to charge two electric-powered vehicles. At McDonald Observatory, the vehicles are used to transport astronomy staff members to and from the house to the telescopes. Excess power from the PV system is stored in batteries during the day for use at night. They also power an adjacent staff house.



Figure 8: BLOOMhouse at McDonald Observatory



a) E Summer in Austin, Tx



b) Winter in Austin, Tx

Figure 9: BOOMhouse daily winter/summer energy consumption and production

### 4 CONCLUSION

In assessing the Solar Decathlon competition, as process, pedagogy, and product, it becomes clear that the challenges and possibilities of the Solar Decathlon are not solely engaged in questions of renewable energy. In fact, *logistics, material assemblies, inhabitation, building code integration and education* became the driving concerns that focused the project around the broader questions of collaboration and sustainability as an environmental, technical and social practice. These issues are critical to presenting the feasibility of solar energy technologies to the general public, and are closely inter-related. While there is no one solution, experience has proved that by blending design questions with logistics questions and performance questions with social questions, we ultimately turn an environmental challenge into environmental research which is based upon *principles of collaboration* -- between a homeowner and the home, between a building and its environment, between ecology and economics.

The team's investigations suggest that progressive technologies offer solutions to the serious emerging

challenges of energy efficiency and sustainable development and thereby become a strong design shaping force. These progressive technologies integrate photovoltaic systems; passive solar heating, solar-induced ventilation, daylighting, water use efficiency, regenerative waste management, smart energy management systems, and other low-entropy open building systems that contribute to "green" architecture. This study of building systems also includes the principles, conventions, standards, applications and restrictions associated with the manufacture and use of existing and emerging construction materials and assemblies and their effect on the environment. These technologies serve as catalysts for change.

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