

VOLUME 4 NO. 31, 2012

# Canadian Builders Quarterly®

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A 30-year timeline.  
A \$30 billion price tag.  
An unprecedented scope.

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Affordable aesthetics

# RENEWAL & RETURN

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Building "curb appeal"

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Acoustic-design gurus





Photo: Aaron Jay Photography

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# It started with what Allison Holden thought was a high-school photography course. Now, it's her dream come true.

Interview by Seth Putnam

When people asked **Allison Holden** what she wanted to be when she grew up, “architect” wasn’t on her shortlist. Yet here she is, the principal of her own architecture firm, **One SEED Architecture + Interiors**, which specializes in designing contemporary residences. Before starting the company in 2008, she worked in commercial architecture. But there was something missing. Although she had gained valuable experience, she yearned to draft her own designs. So she plunged headlong into independence and dedicated herself to turning peoples’ life savings into dreams come true in a sustainable way. *Canadian Builders Quarterly* touched base with Holden to look back over the past four years.

## One SEED At a Glance

**Location:**  
Vancouver, BC

**Founded:**  
2008

**Employees:**  
1 full-time, 3–4 consultants

**Specialty:**  
Residential design and interior renovations

**Annual projects:**  
9

## CBQ: If architecture wasn't on your radar at first, how did you get started?

Allison Holden: I thought I was taking a photography course as a high-school elective. It ended up being a drafting course, and I fell in love with the idea of creating an imaginary space from nothing. So I determined my university choice—McGill University, in Montréal—based on which had an undergraduate architecture program. After university, I had a year and a half of work experience, including nine months at a French, all-female firm. That really inspired me to be one of the women who

make it through. As the years go on, fewer women are still practicing as family life catches up.

## CBQ: What got you to Vancouver?

AH: I got my master’s degree and did my thesis on an aboriginal healing centre, and worked with a healer from the Algonquin nation. I became LEED accredited in school, and the first LEED-accredited designer in Québec. At the time, there just wasn’t the push there for green. So I moved out to Vancouver, because that has always been my passion for as long as I can remember.

## CBQ: And how did you start One SEED?

AH: Architecture is creative and passionate. But to get there, you have to spend quite a few years drawing other people’s designs. I had great mentors, but it was never my design. I had taken a leave of absence to help my parents with their house; then my boss hired me to design a house for him; and then a third opportunity fell right into my lap. So I said, “Forget this.” It really just takes one person to give you the chance to do it on your own.



Image Rendering: RealSpace3d.com

**CBQ: What's behind the name?**

AH: It comes from the writings of Vitruvius, who was one of the first people who created a manifesto for architectural excellence. His idea centred around three words: *firmitas* [strong], *utilitas* [useful], and *venustas* [beautiful]. So I made that my own philosophy, and SEED is an acronym: Sustainable. Evocative. Efficient. Distinctly purposeful. People come to me with their life savings and say, "Make my dream house." It's a huge responsibility but also a huge honour.

**CBQ: Can you talk a bit about the Narrow Passive House you're designing.**

AH: The clients have a new baby and wanted to build a sustainable house. It's an interesting property. In Vancouver, the smallest standard-lot size is 33 feet. This property is less: 30 feet. I favour West Coast contemporary feel, so I used a natural palette with warm woods and cool tones. In the name of affordability, it's fairly geometric and boxy. When you walk in the door, it goes straight from entrance to living room to dining room to kitchen to back deck.

In the interest of promoting green practices, sunlight pours in through a light well, knocking diffuse light through the whole space. And there's a CMU wall that sucks up the heat during the winter and regulates the temperature in the house for free. There's also a very special green roof—50 percent of which will be planted.

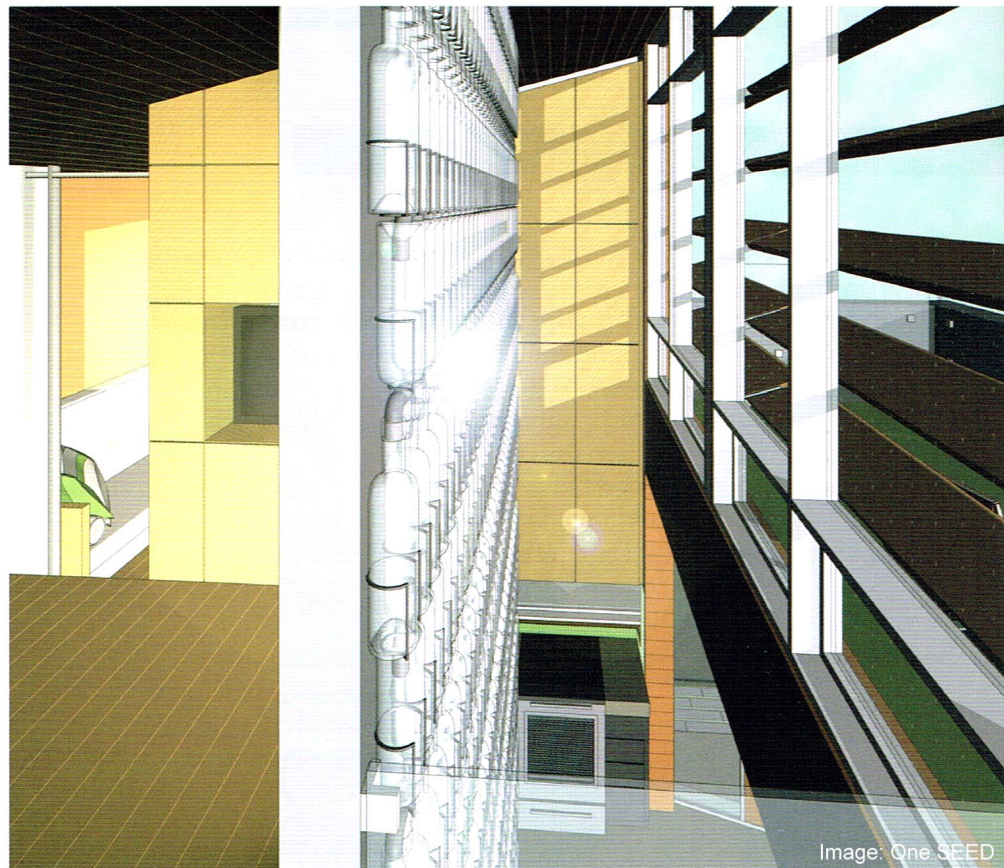


Image: One SEED

Top: The Narrow Passive House has a flexible open-concept main floor, where natural materials flow from outside to inside. The space is passively lit, heated, and ventilated by the CMU block wall, which extends up to the south-facing rooftop windows.  
 Above: The thermal-mass waterwall is both beautiful and functional in the Ridiculously Small (Eco) Footprint House. The low winter sunlight hits the water, reflecting daylight down to the main floor and warming the water to create a radiant source of heat. Summer light is shaded and enters only as diffuse daylight, thus the waterwall has a cooling effect on the house.

**"Architecture is creative and passionate. But to get there, you have to spend quite a few years drawing other people's designs."**

**ALLISON HOLDEN, PRINCIPAL**

**CBQ: Word is that you've entered a prototype in the Interior Design West competition.**

AH: Yes, it's the Ridiculously Small (Eco) Footprint House. It has a [footprint of] 398 square feet, including patios and overhangs. But it's a hyperfunctional, compact living space. At 20' x 20', it fits well within Vancouver's usual garage footprint. The design is contemporary, whimsical, fun, and adaptable. It's got one bedroom, a living room, and a bathroom, with an upper floor for flex space and a green roof on top, which doubles as outdoor space for privacy and somewhere to grow herbs.

One of the coolest features is its "guerilla thermal-mass project." I used wire cages for bike water bottles and put clear-glass wine bottles filled with water in them. The light hits the water and retains heat and radiates it into the house. But in the summer, it acts as a cooling device.

**CBQ: There seems to be a refreshing, creative whimsy about the project.**

AH: This is part of what made me fall in love with architecture. I got to do whatever I wanted because I didn't have a particular client in mind. So I stuck with what I care about: sustainability and affordability.

**CBQ: Are you hoping to do more of this in the future?**

AH: I just want to keep working with people who are excited about their projects—people who have aspirations and a dream they want to attain that I can help them get to. **CBQ**

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