

## The Guilty Environmentalist's Home Inefficiency Audit

Amory Lovins would shudder with disgust.

I'm shuddering, too—more from the cold than anything else. Although there is the guilt. Not just the guilt of living in an energy-inefficient home. This is something far worse.

Ralph Cavanagh would treat me as a leper and never return my phone calls if he knew the truth.

I'm living in an energy-dysfunctional house and it's all my own fault.

Ever since that disastrous fire during the early hours of a late-November day, this house has been a tragedy. From an efficiency standpoint, it's been a travesty after the thermal shell was pierced by a firefighter's axe.

I used to worry about warm air leaking through the fireplace flue. Now I listen to plastic tarps wildly flapping in the rain and wonder: what kind of R-factor does half-inch plywood over an open hole rate? We've got nine of them in three rooms.

I used to fantasize about living in a self-sustainable efficiency showcase home. Now I'm dreaming of windows for Christmas, just like the ones I used to know.

Maybe I could use some weather stripping. This duct tape doesn't seem to do the job very well. Neither do these electric space heaters. The big ones the contractor brought in to dry the water-damaged wood floors were pretty powerful, but I got paranoid about using them when they started melting the heavy-duty extension cords we bought at ACE Hardware. These other heaters just lie along the floors like plug-in frogs, creaking, croaking, and smelling, eating electrons and belching.

As an environmentalist, I hate to admit this: global warming is starting to sound appealing.

The most effective heating device in the house is the oven. At least I throw potatoes in to assuage my guilt. Would you like a baked potato? They make great foot warmers.

For a while the house seemed decorated by a joint venture of Count Dracula and Cristo. The burnt-out former offices were a uniform shade of charcoal; everything in the kitchen was covered with smoke, canvas and plastic. Now the kitchen is soot-free and repainted and the front rooms are sprayed with sealer and primer to lock in the smell. It looks and feels like a fantasy ice palace.

For sanity's sake and aesthetic reasons, we try to segregate a few heated rooms from the gaping black hole. Interior doors were either removed or warped by the fire. Nothing stays closed tightly or for long, as the dog insists on open access to conduct her constant security rounds.

Her barking at every sound—unfiltered by windowpanes or drywall—only calls neighborhood attention to our pitiful ecology.

The front of the house looks like an EPA Superfund site. When I found out the asbestos shingling installed decades ago will require a special permit to remove, I cringed at the added assault to the environment wrought by this blaze. The huge debris box, overflowing and soaked by rain, was insult enough. It soon became a collection point for other local rubbish, used tires, spent paint cans, plastic jugs of car oil. My secret is that there's still more toxic waste inside the house, waiting for a second box.

I carry the stigma of ecological disaster.

The black soot of guilt returns to my hands with everything I touch. Out, out, damned smudge, I curse while scrubbing with Simple Green cleanser. Then I can find nothing less than filthy to wipe my hands with, and the cycle begins anew.

We are wasting energy in ways that PG&E never imagined.

Perhaps there's a book idea lurking under this mess. *50 Simple Things You Can Do to Ruin the Earth*. Number One, let your house catch on fire; the rest follows.

There are no boards over the bedroom windows. Nor is there glass, just brown paper and opaque tarp that breathes like a plastic lung, inhaling cold, exhaling warm air into the night.

The clothes washer/dryer runs baseload. Some articles require multiple cycles, hot water, and super detergent to remove the soot. Simple Green is not enough.

And then there's the utility bill. PG&E came today. I was hoping the meter reader wouldn't be able to get through the barricaded garage door and we'd get a month's reprieve. No such luck. \$99.59—ouch!

Natural gas consumption wasn't so bad. Of course, the main was shut for days. But we ate 636 kilowatt-hours of electricity—most of them at the highest billed rate.

How can that be? Most of the appliances got melted; many of the circuits are fried. The only working light in the kitchen is a compact fluorescent. There's got to be something wrong with my meter. The utility's computer noticed the big increase in consumption. A note on the bill suggests we might qualify for industrial rates.

But I know the truth. I'm being punished for my sins. My mother didn't exactly say that on the telephone today, but she hinted. Just what I need, a mother's guilt trip added to my environmental impact remorse (EIR).

The insurance company may not be able to pin down the cause of the fire, but I know why it happened. It wasn't the old, dry floorboards, as the insurance inspector surmised. Nor was it the cat knocking papers onto the heater grate, as the fire captain suggested.

It was my own fault, and I must confess to the world.

I did it. I left the thermostat on above 55 degrees when I went to bed. Amory, Ralph, can you forgive me?

? December 10, 1993 ?

