

Stephen's Healthy Housing Column

Hiring an MCS Safe Contractor

- Stephen Collette, BBEC, LEED AP



Stephen Collette is a Certified Building Biology Environmental Consultant (BBEC). This lengthy certification analyses the built environment and how it impacts people's health. Stephen was a natural builder for 5 years specializing in straw bale construction. Stephen has an engineering background and training which enables him to understand the various processes occurring within the home and how they can interact. Applying these skills and knowledge to the standard home and small office enables Your Healthy House to find the reasons for poor indoor air quality and to create solutions to help create your healthy house.

Stephen Collette is a Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design - Accredited Professional (LEED AP), which allows Stephen to use the Canada Green Building Council's guidelines and method to ensure a quantitative approach to building green.

The struggle for safe housing is the single most important battle that people with MCS have to deal with. It is often the main requirement for the return to functional health and, as such, will take priority over many other issues within the life of someone with MCS. The ability to engage, work with, and enjoy the fruits of safe work carried on within your home occurs through a process of finding, hiring and working with MCS safe contractors. This article will attempt to help you through this process.

Knowledge is Power – For You

Being able to “talk the talk” is tremendously helpful when dealing with trades people. I recommend reading up on the building materials and ideas that you want to try to implement into your healthy house.

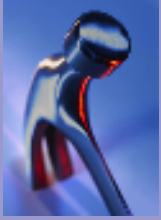
The first of two books that I recommend to start the process is the recently revised “Prescriptions for a Healthy House” by Paula Baker-Laporte, Erica Elliot and John Banta. This is a must have. It outlines the technical sides of healthy building and gives lots of references on signs to make and post on your property (for example) and also how to talk the building talk. This book is designed to do just that, talk to trades people. It's the best book out there to accomplish that. It also has a great list of safe products.

The second book is “Homes That Heal and Those That Don't” by Athena Thompson. This is a great book to learn about what can negatively impact your health within your home. It's an easy read with a great storyline about a fictitious family showing the things we do that make a home unhealthy. It can give you some basic language on buildings and help you explain how homes can make people sick. This is also a good book to educate the friends and family of the reasons you need a healthier space.

The web has some great information on healthy homes. Some of it can be overwhelming and less than helpful, especially since most stuff is just a front to sell you something. Resources like the MCS-America resources <http://tinyurl.com/3tbuau> are a great place to start to learn. You can take the information in small chunks and begin to learn about the opportunities that you could consider in your home.

The Chosen One

Finding a contractor can be a challenge. Ask friends, neighbors, post your needs on the MCS-America Yahoo group <http://tinyurl.com/4stw53>, to see if anyone knows of someone who does good work. Look for Green Builders organizations in your area. Green builders are not necessarily healthy builders, but at least they are interested in doing things better, and



you may find one interested. The American Lung Association has Healthy Home builders, and you may also find one of those people in your area.

You may in fact find none of these and go simply with someone who has done quality work for someone you know and is interested, and willing to learn to do things healthier. Regardless of whom you use, ask for references, call them, and ask things like, "Were they on time, and on budget? How did they deal with problems, such as mistakes and cost overruns? Did they clean up after themselves? Were they respectful, i.e. not smoking or playing loud music and swearing all day?" Asking whether you liked their work or not is the last question, since people once a job is done, forgets about the trials and tribulations to get there, so it's important to ask the other questions first.

Knowledge is Power – The Contractor

Once you have a contractor, start to educate them on MCS and what they need to know about it. Giving them links to websites, books such as the ones above, and any other pertinent information can be helpful to ensure they do things the way you want them to. We don't always have the luxury of time to leisurely read through a book, so highlight it, or just have a long conversation and book marking pages and websites you want to show to them.

If you are having an interview process like this with a couple potential builders, don't be cheap. Pay them for their consulting time. You are educating them, and they are going to be offering ideas and suggestions, some of which you may use with another builder. Show them respect and they in turn will show you the same respect. Again

not all of us have the opportunity to research and take time to hire someone, so do the best you can, and be sure to call the references.

Agreement To Work

Once you have a contractor, who is willing to work with you, a contract is a good idea. This goes for MCS people and anyone else, just to protect both of you.

For MCS, I would add a performance clause to the contract with respect to your sensitivities. This would state something to the effect of "No perfumes, scented personal products, smoking on the property, scented laundry products or any building material substitutions to be made. If any of these points are not followed a financial penalty up to and including contract termination will be exercised."

This isn't a legal quote here, so check where you live, but the point is; get it in writing to protect yourself. If they decide to use a toxic caulking or someone smokes in the house, things are going from bad to serious in short order, and you could be impacted enough to be unable to stay in your home. I would also consider having all people working on the project, including sub trades to sign the same contract, so that no one can say, "I didn't know."

The next article in this series will address how to select safe building materials.

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