

A Profile of Cécile Green and Daniel Little — Bringing Heart and Soul to Landscaping and Natural Building

by Lani Kwon Meilgaard

I first came across Landscaping for the Heart and Soul a few years ago when I saw a business card on a community bulletin board. It had a simple yet elegant design of a Lily of the Valley printed in black, with the wording, “Landscaping for the Heart and Soul: Creating Spaces of Sanctuary,” on recycled green cardstock. The name of that company and image stayed with me, and recently, I was delighted when my editor suggested that I contact the owners and learn more about what they do and how and why they do it.

In this era of websites, it was possible to instantly see digital photographs of some of the work of the husband and wife team, Daniel Little and Cécile Green. I also learned that they have expanded their business over the past seven years to include eco-friendly renovations, natural building techniques and creative tile installations. I scanned the thumbnail photos and larger images of projects that featured a man-made pond with lotuses blooming and a gazebo constructed of “cob,” a mixture of clay, straw and sand, with reclaimed stone and cedar.

I e-mailed them and a couple of days later, Cécile called me back. We arranged to meet on a chilly day in early October at their home in Northeast Ann Arbor. As I drove past the lighted Broadway intersection and up Pontiac Trail, I noticed there were charming cottage and ranch-style family homes in this area of town with well-manicured lawns and hedges. That day, some of the houses were adorned with early Halloween decorations: leaf-filled plastic ghosts, jack-o-lanterns and comical witches crashed with their stocking legs displayed around the trunks of trees.

were tall, sinewy and tan from working outdoors all summer and looked to be in their late-twenties or early-thirties. Daniel had reddish brown hair and blue-green eyes and Cécile light brown hair and eyes. Cécile was wearing a beautiful sweater made of multicolored homespun wool and slacks and Daniel had on a dress shirt and jeans. Both looked a little

overall impression was relaxed, uncluttered and welcoming. Cécile offered me a cup of tea, which I gratefully accepted. As I waited for the teakettle to boil, I glanced up and saw the rich timber of the window frames, which I later learned were made of reclaimed oak with non-toxic stain and craftsman-style joinery. Off to one side, there was an alcove painted deep blue with an arc where normally one might find a closet. In the kitchen, terracotta Mexican tiles on the floor were blocked with lapis-colored tiles and gave the space an orderly, yet cozy, ambience.



Photo by Linda Lawson

Daniel Little and Cécile Green have a “commitment to create sacred space by taking into account the client, the location, as well as the animals and plants that live there as a unified living space.”

I pulled up to a ranch-style house with freshly-turned earth in the front yard. A pick-up truck, with the words, “Heart and Soul Natural Building: Beautiful, Living Spaces,” printed on its tailgate and sides, was parked along the curb. I walked to the door and knocked. Cécile and Daniel greeted me with smiles and handshakes. They both

nervous at first and asked where would be the best place to start. I asked them where they would feel most comfortable. They led the way to their kitchen.

As we passed through the living room, I noticed that the décor was comfortable and yet exotic, with what looked like vintage furnishings paired with family heirlooms and antiques. The

Little and Green keep busy with their three businesses: Landscaping for the Heart and Soul; Heart and Soul Natural Building; and Firesong Tile: Creative Tile Installations.

Cécile and Daniel poured the tea, sat down and we began to chat about their work. Cécile began her career as an organic farmer in Vermont and Virginia, while Daniel’s background was in construction, carpentry and woodworking in Kalamazoo. As a young man, he had helped his family build two of their homes, and he smiled as he said, “Building has always been a part of who I am.” I asked how they came to be in this part of Michigan, and Cécile told me that one of the primary motivations for moving here was because their spiritual teacher, Brenda Morgan, whom Cécile met 16 years ago, was here in Ann Arbor.

As we spoke, several words came up again and again—relationship, flow, integration, sustainable and community—forming a cohesive theme inspiring their work. When I asked how they believe their work is different from other landscaping and building



Photo by Linda Lawson

ment over the past year as they were offered an exciting, ongoing invitation to holistically look at the entire space and consider the client's needs in order to design a series of projects that would unify and enhance the property. For example, a couple of trees that were initially planted didn't take to the location and were removed and replaced. They also excavated what they thought was a boulder in the meadow, but it ended up being the tip of a six foot tall, four foot wide standing stone, which they first moved to one location, and then chose to reposition in the meadow, standing above the spot where it had once been buried by centuries of earth. Daniel said, "A place has qualities that need to be paid attention to, aspects that can be deepened and developed." Cécile eloquently added, "An inhabited place is like a grown-up person with its own ambiance and presence. Whereas, a new place is untouched." What comes across clearly as we talked was the importance of being open to seeing the big picture and flexible to the evolution of a landscape and the natural metamorphosis of clients' needs and aspirations. They also offer ongoing maintenance and support consultations, teaching clients who are interested in learning organic landscaping and natural building techniques. They have done workshops at Crazy Wisdom Meeting

some blueprints. She was also tanned, fit and youthful, and she had a sunflower in her hair. We shook hands, then I followed Cécile and Daniel to the sliding patio door. As I stepped outdoors, a gray, tiger-striped kitty named Rosy decided to join the tour and rubbed against my pant leg. She drew my attention to the patio flooring. It was unusual, made of irregular,

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firms, Cécile replied that their focus has always come from "service and a commitment to create a sacred space by taking into account the client, the location, as well as the animals and plants that live there as a unified living space." Almost as if on cue, one of their cats, a plush, gray shorthair, named Arame, after the seaweed, leaped up on the table and checked me out, cocking her head to one side and sniffing my papers, before approving my presence in *her* living space with a flick of the tail as she jumped back down. We chuckled at her "cat-titude," and I asked them about other members of their human crew.

They currently employ seven experienced landscapers, builders and carpenters, one office manager, who is also a landscape architect, and a crew leader, who has been with them for over five years. As one of their current clients confided to me in a later interview, she was impressed by their teamwork and creativity. For example, they have devised playful ways of dividing the tasks fairly: one of these is a modified paper-stone-scissors, called wizards-giants-elves, where each crew member turns away from each other in a circle, and then spins around to face each other with varying expressions signifying what they are. Giants beat wizards, wizards beat elves and elves beat giants, until the tasks are assigned.

They work primarily in the Ann Arbor area (~95% of their business) and greater Washtenaw County and tailor each project to the client's needs, imagination and budget. Typically, they receive a call or e-mail from an interested client, sometimes a referral from a previous client, and then arrange a free initial consultation in order to visit the site with that client for ~1 or 2 hours. They share ideas about what might be done in a particular space and brainstorm with the client about what might be possible. Next, back at their home offices, they sketch some of their ideas on paper, which later become more detailed plans for organic landscaping or blueprints for renovations and/or natural building projects. They meet with the client again to provide pictures, referrals to other clients, bring in samples of potential plants and/or natural building materials and offer an estimate in both money and time.

One of their clients has continued to experi-

Room in the past and can also offer one-on-one and small group consultations on-site.

At this point in the interview, I was eager to see other examples of their work, and they generously offered to give me a tour of their home office and backyard. I stood up, slightly stiff from being seated for over an hour, and followed them through the hallway. There was a wooden coat rack hanging on the wall in the hall that was Shaker-like in design. I commented on it, and Daniel smiled and told me he had carved it by hand from salvaged redwood planks that had once been part of a deck.

This is a hallmark of their philosophy, natural building is not just about utilizing brand new natural materials, such as straw bales or clay, but rather, it is about salvaging renewable, recycled materials, such as reclaimed lumber and stone.

We passed from the darkened corridor into a well-lit space with an adobe floor, a mixture of sand and mud, painted an earthy red, under which radiant heating had been installed. Their crew leader, Laura Trumbell, was leaning over a drafting table looking at

platter-sized chunks of blue-gray stone, fitted gracefully around a fire pit in an expanding circle. The garden, too, was laid out in a circular motif, and Cécile told me she had planted *penstemon*, native to Michigan and other parts of the Americas, which blooms all summer, and *sun rose*, native to the Mediterranean, with dainty springtime flowers. Daniel had installed several standing stones, approximately hip high, around the perimeter that added charm and interest to the garden, creating the sacred space that they aim to achieve in their work.

As we walked back through the office, I requested and they gave me several brochures and business cards. A visiting neighbor's cat, a longhaired Siamese, fancifully named Sir Lancelot, gave me a final inspection. He sauntered past me with a flourish, as I thanked Cécile and Daniel for their time and generosity. I am much more informed about landscaping and natural building and grateful for the opportunity to share their work with the Crazy Wisdom Community. Thank you Cécile Green and Daniel Little!



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