# A Green Hardware Store on Every Corner? It's Not As Far-Fetched As You May
by Sarah Morgan

Jason Ballard, founder of the Texas-based TreeHouse, has big dreams for his burgeoning chain of eco-friendly home improvement stores.

The house in Boulder, Colo., was beautiful. The floors were cork, the carpets were made of recycled plastic bottles — the whole place was being redone on sustainable, environmental principles. “It was mind-expanding,” says Jason Ballard, the co-founder and CEO of eco-friendly home improvement retailer TreeHouse. The house belonged to Ballard’s instructor in a wilderness EMT program. Ballard was staying there shortly after college, and he was inspired by his instructor’s efforts to remodel his home to make it more environmentally friendly. “It was such a lovely vision of what was possible,” he says.

But the more Ballard learned about sustainable home improvement, the more he realized how difficult it was to find attractive, well-designed products. That insight — and that vision of what was possible in the home — led Ballard to create TreeHouse, a company that’s aimed at transforming the home improvement market and, with it, the home itself. Among the wares and services available are recycled glass countertops, electric lawn tools and solar-panel installation. Ballard says customers often call his company “the Whole Foods of home improvement — and it’s not too far from the truth.”

Ballard has always had an eco-conscious mindset. His grandfather was an early role model. “He wouldn’t have called himself a conservationist,” Ballard says, “but he gave me both a conservation ethic and a tremendous sense of wonder about the natural world.” He studied conservation biology in college, where he started to learn about the enormous impact our homes have on the environment. “All we hear about on TV is gas-guzzling SUVs,” he says, “but the real problem is the buildings we’re living in every day.”

The TreeHouse store in Austin, Texas. Photo by Kirsten Kaiser

Private residences are the biggest users of energy, the biggest users of renewable and nonrenewable materials, the biggest producers of landfill waste and the second-biggest users of water. Most exposure to toxins also takes place in the home. “I realized that if I wanted to make an impact with regard to these existentially challenging issues, then the best area for me to focus on was, in fact, the home,” says Ballard, who’s currently completing a Social Impact Fellowship with GLG, a membership-based learning platform. Through GLG, Jason and his team have learned about inventory management, retail strategy, in-store user experience and customer data management to help the company implement best practices across multiple locations.
After college, Ballard worked in green building for a while, learning all he could about the market. “What I noticed was that everyone had the same set of problems,” he says. It was

hard to find sustainable products, and when he did find them, they were expensive, and only available from a few boutique companies. “The obvious blocker to the whole industry moving forward is access to products at a decent rate, and with some level of curation and education around those products,” Ballard says.

TreeHouse is built on a few core ideas. First, Ballard says, most home improvement products are terrible — poor quality, toxic and unsustainable. Second, most home improvement services aren’t very good, either. Anyone who’s ever embarked on such a project knows that they’re often delayed and routinely run over budget. The industry also hasn’t gone digital yet, making it difficult to get information on the status of your project when you want it. “The whole experience around home improvement needs to be reimagined,” Ballard says. “We are now trying to make not just the products great, but the technology great and the service great.”

TreeHouse aims to make sustainable options appeal to more than just die-hard environmentalists. “If we want healthy and sustainable homes to be the norm, they have to be better than conventional homes. And everything around the process has to be better,” Ballard emphasizes. That’s part of why he decided to start a for-profit company to accomplish his environmental goals. “If you’re in a for-profit business, all of your assumptions are tested all the time,” he says. “It forces you to very quickly arrive at what works to affect change.”

Ballard has ambitious goals for TreeHouse. Today, the company has one brick-and-mortar store in Austin, Texas, and is opening two more this year, including one in Dallas. Within the next two years, he plans on opening still more stores, and expanding beyond Texas. Right now, TreeHouse touches only a tiny fraction of the 80 to 100 million homes in the country, Ballard says. He believes 20 stores — a benchmark he hopes to hit in five years — would drive that figure up to 10 percent. The ultimate goal: Launch 300 stores nationwide to reach 80 percent of all the homes in the U.S.

“Our plan is to run hard at those milestones,” Ballard says. “We don’t have a thousand years to figure this out. We are making decisions in the next hundred years as a species that we will have to live with for the next two thousand years.”