

# New house buyers seek ways to go green

Dwindling natural resource, environmental awareness, and increased concerns about indoor air quality are just a few of the reasons more and more potential house buyers are asking builders to "build it green."

Just what constitutes an environmentally healthy house is currently in the eye of the beholder or more accurately the buyer. According to a recent environmental survey conducted by the National Association of Home Builders, an increasing number of buyers want some environmental amenities. A majority of customers want energy-efficient appliances and building products that cause no negative health impacts.

As the clamor for healthy houses and healthy products grows, more and more builders are developing green products. Some, like the Good Cents Environmental Home, let the buyer select from a list of environmental products and enhance the design of the house for the eco-conscious buyer.

According to George Russell, environ-

mental products director for McStain Enterprises in Boulder, Colo., three areas are of major concern in environmental building. They are resource efficiency, energy efficiency and indoor air quality. Taking these qualities into account, McStain recently built a 2,300-square-foot house in an attempt to discover what works and what doesn't in environmental building options.

John Ruitly, owner of Ruitly Homes in Cary, N.C., builds Healthyhouse, a focus-group-designed, health conscious, environmentally sensitive house which combines a multitude of "green building" ideas. According to Ruitly, the purpose of the house is to "educate consumers, builders and Realtors about available products and technologies and their benefits to the house construction industry."

According to Liza Bowles, president of the NAHB Research Center, developing an industry-wide green building stamp of approval is a complex process, and it is an issue that is receiving serious consideration and study. The biggest obstacle is getting agreement among compet-

ing manufacturers, says Bowles.

"Everyone thinks that their product is the best, and they usually have a case to make about why it is," said Bowles. For instance, concrete, which takes lots of energy to produce, is an energy-saver after installation. Other products take less energy to produce but use more over the long term. As Bowles put it, "In the whole area of embodied energy, everybody has their own angle. An industry-wide standard is complicated."

To date, research efforts are directed toward answering two questions: "Is there anything we could do that would be meaningful to consumers?" and "Is there something meaningful and measurable?"

The relative ease in measuring recycled content has led the Canadian Home Builders Association to launch a green building program based largely on recycled content, said Bowles.

So far, the move toward green building has been primarily consumer-driven, according to David Johnston, president of What's Working, an environmental consulting firm in Boulder, Colo. Johnston

said he would like to see some sort of voluntary program for builders to certify their green building practices and products. But regulation is not the answer, he says. "As soon as we try to regulate this, we'll kill it. Right now, it's consumer driven, and it's just good business."

Although the degree and expense to which a homeowner or buyer will go to make a house green is entirely subjective, there are a few general rules of thumb to follow:

- Use low-toxic or water-based paints or varnishes, such as linseed plant finishes, instead of volatile compounds that emit more hazardous chemicals.
- Avoid use of synthetic carpets. Replace them with natural fiber rugs, ceramic tile or wood floors.
- Reduce the use of interior particle board that contains formaldehyde and other glues or chemicals.
- Install an outside air intake in the heating system that allows outside air to circulate in the house.
- Try to limit waste at the construction site and recycle wherever it is possible.

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## Resources for "Green" Building

Although there is no one clearing-house or central resource for listing and measuring the quality of "green" building products, a number of different guides and directories currently exist. Consumers who are thinking of building a "green" home either have to do the research themselves, hire a "green building" consultant or work with a builder who has a reputation in this area. A few of the "green" guides currently on the market include:

Guide to Resource Efficient

**Building Elements.** Lists hundreds of "green" building products, including foundations, framing, panel systems, sheathing, wall-board, roofing, windows etc. Cost: \$25. Available from the Center for Resourceful Building Technology. Contact Steve Loken at 406-549-7078.

**Environmental Building Products Guide.** Guide under development by the Eco-Group Inc. will list hundreds of "green" building products. Contact: David Drummond at

602-406-0211.

**Green Building Design Guide and Product Directory.** A hand-assembled, three-inch, three-ring binder with actual manufacturer cut sheets and specifications. Cost: \$300. Contact: David Johnson at 303-444-7044.

**Shelter Supply Products Catalog.** Description of products that reduce air leakage and control moisture. Also, ventilation systems that maintain air quality in tighter houses. Free. Contact 800-762-8399.

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