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Alameda County, Calif.



Sustainable Products



Better Building Envelopes
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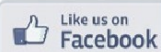
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Green on Top, Green Within

As consumers become more educated in eco-conscious products, the opportunities in green movement are increasing—and consequently so is the value

By PETER DI NATALE

Green building has been around for a while, but it's never been more accessible. The long-held perception that sustainability carries a hefty price tag has been quietly dispelled in the wake of improved technologies that allow builders and suppliers to offer more products and services at different price points. These days, one out of three projects we work on includes requests for green building features, whether it's new construction built on a comprehensive energy efficient platform, or a simple retrofit aimed at reducing utility bills.

Today's more educated consumer understands that greener building translates into higher market value and lower operating costs in the long run; however, most consumers are not only more educated these days, but they are also more eco-conscious. For instance, we're seeing a gradual exodus in some communities from the showy McMansions so popular over the past decade as people choose to downsize to a smaller carbon footprint. A few years ago, many property owners flocked to pricey, exotic rainforest woods like "Brazilian Cherry," but today are avoiding them because they're more concerned with where their materials are sourced from.

...green building initiatives bring countless benefits for individual properties as well as the wider economy.

In its place we've seen a substantial demand for lumber sanctioned by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC). An FSC stamp, similar to an ENERGY STAR® stamp on appliances, is the best indicator that the wood used for flooring or cabinets was harvested in a sustainable way. The FSC also has a pledge that for every tree that is cut down, two more are planted in its place.

In addition to FSC lumber, we're incorporating reclaimed materials like petrified wood into our green building projects. There is a wealth of wood that can be salvaged from the bottom of a pond or a lake. Some of the older logs have beautiful concentric ring patterns, elegant patinas and add eye-catching accents to walls. On one of our projects, recycled wine barrels were used to outfit a sound studio. The barrels were cut into three or four inch segments and applied to the walls. The effect was not only eye-catching, but created outstanding acoustics. This is positive proof that you can

design sustainably without sacrificing style. In rural communities, old barns make excellent sources of wood that can be repurposed to similar effect for floors or walls, or for customized shelving, libraries, or wine cellars, depending on building design.

Recycling is not limited to wood. Many people are surprised to learn that you can recycle solar panels and incorporate them into rooftops as well, another cost-effective route to going solar. In certain situations, you can harness the power of the sun without panels. We installed skylights in a home in Upstate New York to take advantage of the heating properties of a 20-foot interior stone wall. When the sunbeams come through the glass skylight, they would heat up the stone wall to keep the room warm during the day and cool at night. Brick, concrete, and stone all have a high thermal capacity and offer an alternative way to use the power of sunlight. If you can't construct a stone or brick feature wall inside your home, you can still increase your home's thermal capacity by utilizing or building in southern exposures. If positioned properly, this technique maximizes your natural sunlight and the absorption capacity of solar panels.

On the topic of paint, we're seeing a higher demand for low-VOC paints on our green building projects. Paints that are lower in VOCs (volatile organic compounds) not only give off fewer odors, but also help the environment. Typically, these coatings are water-based as opposed to solvent-based, which react with sunlight and contribute to bad ozone.

Finally, to literally stay on top of environmental benefits, you might consider shaping your own environment by incorporating a flat rooftop design. Flat rooftops invite more sunlight, increase electrical capacity with or without solar panels driving your appliances, add lounge or play space to the structure, and offer opportunities to create gardens. All are elements for customers to enjoy whether designing homes from scratch or during a complete renovation.

As opportunities in green building continue to grow, so will the value. From immediate utilities savings and long-term energy reductions to higher property values and the potential increase in home appreciation, green building initiatives bring countless benefits for individual properties as well as the wider economy.



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