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'Green' homes gain following

Builders see profit in environmentally friendly houses

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There are many shades of green in home design and construction choices, from tighter doors to a wall-to-wall, zero-energy home that costs nearly nothing to maintain.

But building with the environment in mind needs another kind of green --- money --- to evolve from a feel-good notion to a source of profits for builders and cost savings for homeowners.

Indeed, green is no longer an enterprise of sheer idealism. It is a business choice.

"I see it as a way to help homeowner investment," said Carl Seville, an Atlanta building consultant as well as former co-owner of SawHorse Inc. "You can make any house healthy, efficient and durable."

Both new construction and renovation can include elements of green: cutting costs of heating and cooling, recycling materials, using products that need not be replaced for years, keeping air clean of toxins.

A house can be sealed from the garage, where cars spew carbon monoxide. Heaters can be sealed. Windows can be upgraded.

For more than 800 attendees at the National Green Building Conference recently in Atlanta, green made sense. The question was more how to market green homes, how to establish rules for labeling a house as green or how to use guidelines already in place.

How big is green?

Like technology conferences that morphed during the 1990s from geeks to entrepreneurs to executives, green conferences no longer are the turf of just environmentalists and back-to-the-earth types.

The Atlanta conference, for instance, drew a 20 percent better turnout than the previous year's sessions, said Marie Yarroll, spokeswoman for the National Association of Home Builders, conference sponsor. A growing number of builders and developers participated.

Another gauge: The annual green conference is sponsored and promoted by the nation's umbrella group for home builders.

Even industry professionals were surprised by the strange alliances they found themselves in. Joe Coakley, vice president of residential development for Port Blakley Communities in Washington state, recounted his recent bemusement to sit at a project-planning session with a member of the Sierra Club.

Coakley's previous interactions with the man had been less cooperative, he said. "This was a guy who had shut down one of my projects."

Change of perception

Green building used to be viewed as expensive or exotic --- science fiction houses, plastered with photovoltaics.

"People think that green is ugly --- that it's the housing version of Birkenstocks," said Sara Gutterman, founding partner of Green Builder in Placitas, N.M.

Today, a green home can look like any other, but green builders acknowledge that the price tag can be a problem. At the extreme, green can pit a consumer's checkbook against the urge to protect the planet. And while many green methods save money, buyers often must calculate their investment against savings that will not come for months or years.

Green Builder put up a 2,800-square-foot house on the outskirts of Albuquerque, N.M. In the walls and foundation, it used insulated concrete forms, blocks made of polystyrene casing filled with recycled concrete. It did it because ICFs are strong, energy efficient and nontoxic, and they dampen sound.

The ICFs cost \$1,200 more than traditional materials to install but were so much more efficient that the house needed a smaller cooling unit and a more modest heater, said Gutterman's partner, Ron Jones.

"We were able to close the gap," he said.

While green's additional costs may be just a few percent of a purchase price, buyers must decide that it's worth it.

The bigger the project, the easier that calculation, Seville said. "There's really not a fast payback on a small investment. But if I'm doing a second-story addition or a whole house, I can make the home green for virtually no more money."

Growing numbers

Even if there is some momentum, there's a long way to go.

Metro Atlanta, one of the nation's hottest markets, has seen yearly home building running at more than a 40,000-a-year clip. The share that is green can be counted in the hundreds.

Nationally, roughly 61,000 green homes have been built since the early 1990s, according to Rich Dooley, environmental analyst and land-use planner at the research center of the National Association of Home Builders.

In contrast, nearly 2 million new homes were built last year alone.

Still, the urge to go green is accelerating, Dooley said: Most of the green homes have gone up since 2000.

The industry has been grappling with the idea of writing rules --- a sort of "green" checklist. The idea could head off government regulations and would provide a marketing tool for such homes.

The NAHB itself has proposed a series of guidelines that can be adopted by local associations.

And there are others selling seals of environmental approval --- like GreenGuard Environmental Institute. The Atlanta-based company offers its GreenGuard label to any housing product that can pass a series of rigorous tests, proving it does not emit toxins into the air.

Spokesman Henning Bloech compared the idea to Underwriters Laboratories, which tests and stamps electrical products. "It's kind of modeled on that."

Founded by Georgia Tech chemist Marilyn Black, GreenGuard currently works with 40 companies, overseeing tests of 3,500 products. Among them: insulation, wall coverings, paints, woods, finishings and adhesives.

Easier argument

The economics for builders, renovators and homeowners has been getting more attractive: Costs of building in environmentally conscious ways are dropping. On the other hand, the longer-term costs for not going green have been rising.

Bad news from oil and natural gas markets will make the argument easier for construction that dramatically cuts energy use, said Jackie Benson, Atlanta-based managing director of BensonMiles TND, an adviser to green builders. "When energy costs go up is when green building goes up."

Still, Atlanta could have a particular resistance to green.

Homeowners here often think of their houses as temporary quarters that they will trade in --- at a profit --- a few years after purchase so they can move up to something better.


That can undercut the urge to upgrade the property.

But Seville said green is not dependent on short-term economics or regional habits. It is, he said, the next logical step in American housing.

"It's still a hard sell," Seville said. "It may be another 15 years before green remodeling is the standard. It may not be a fast process, but people who are dedicated to it, they have to do it."

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