

URBAN RENEWABILITY

Legislation and new eco-friendly construction industry standards are encouraging builders to plan for sustainability as well as style.

By Shellie Karabell



The modern lines at Contempo's Country Club Estates belie the use of sustainable materials.

Global warming and green issues occupy much of today's news. But even a cursory reading between the increasingly dire headlines reveals an impending major shift in the availability of natural resources—signaling the need for humanity to begin thinking seriously about conserving its environment.

Green as a concept begins literally at home. The building, occupancy and maintenance of houses and most other structures create some of the most significant environmental impacts—producing 38 percent of carbon dioxide emissions. According to the US Environmental Protection Agency, the buildings in which we live, work, play, convalesce, shop and warehouse consume 39 percent of energy, 12 percent of water and 68 percent of electricity.

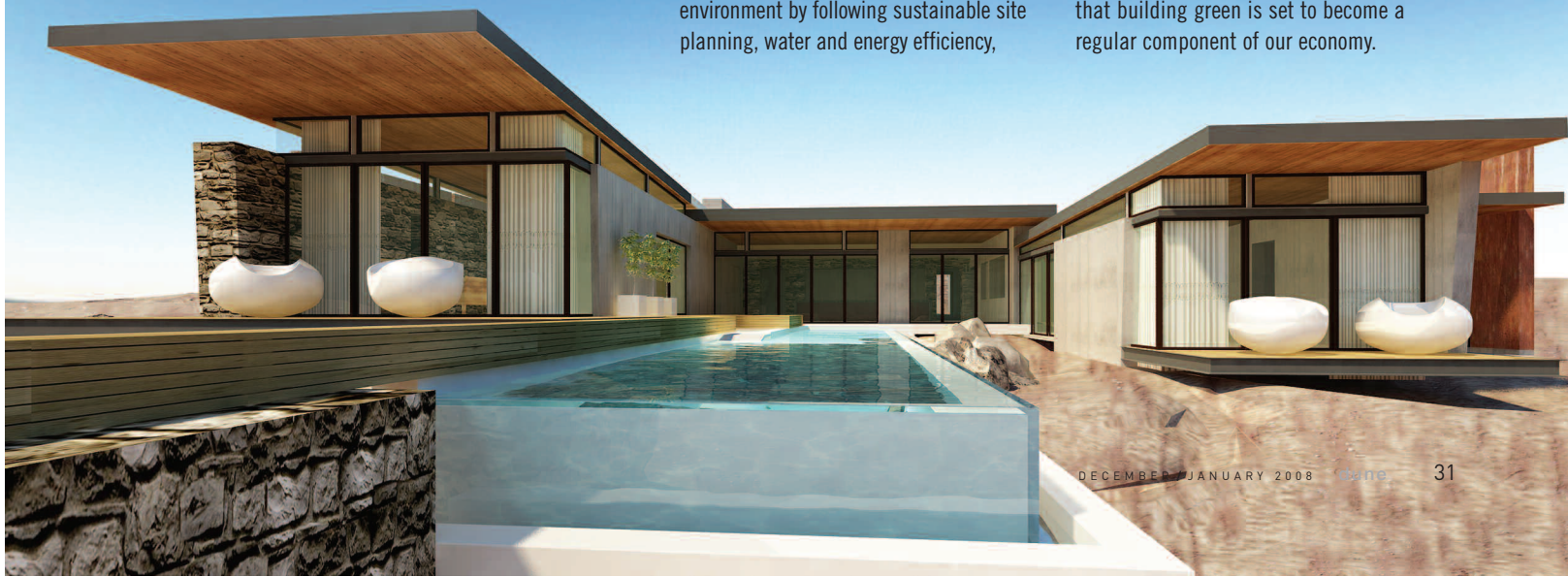
Such statistics sadden Rancho Mirage resident Narendra Patel, an award-winning architect who is internationally recognized for his forward-thinking organic and green designs. Green construction practices, he says, “significantly reduce or eliminate the negative impact of buildings on the environment by following sustainable site planning, water and energy efficiency,

conservation of material and resources, and indoor environment quality.”

In 2003, the National Association of Home Builders published a report, *Building Greener, Building Better: The Quiet Revolution*, and that revolution has become much less quiet. Today, the building industry is building more green homes than ever before and is pushing toward a national standard for environmentally friendly building, design and functionality. It's not just a fad: working in conjunction with the International Code Council, home builders could complete and implement such national standards as early as this year.

There are environmental benefits to building green beyond improving and enhancing natural resources, including social and economic benefits, enhancing occupants' comfort and health, and reducing operating costs. According to figures from McGraw-Hill Construction's *2006 Green Building Report*, sustainable buildings accounted for roughly two percent of commercial construction nationwide in 2004. The report added that by 2010, that figure could jump to as high as 10 percent, or \$20 billion. It would seem that building green is set to become a regular component of our economy.

AR+D's Coyote Heights





Talbert Development's all-green The Shoppes of Rancho Mirage.

ENVIRO-GUIDELINES

California's Title 24, created in 1978 (and updated in 2001 and 2005), sets residential and non-residential building efficiency standards, along with those for energy-efficient appliances, to lower energy-consumption standards for all homes built in the state. It covers such things as insulation, air conditioning, roofing and power.

According to Fred Bell, executive director of the Building Industry Association (BIA) Desert Chapter, this legislation has kept electricity consumption consistent for the past decade. Additionally, Title 24 standards take credit for saving more than \$56 billion in electricity and natural gas costs since 1978, with an additional \$23 billion in savings projected by 2013.

But Peter Koulos, a principal in DNR Partners with projects in Desert Hot Springs and elsewhere in the US, notes: "Title 24 is 20 years old. It's outdated. The industry standard has surpassed it as a matter of course. Builders and manufacturers are already pushing the envelope with things like prefab wall units and gas-filled insulated windows."

That's the main reason BIA's California Green Builder (CGB) program goes a step further than Title 24, setting sustainable construction standards for wood, water and other resources. To date, CGB Homes claim to use 15-20 percent less energy than homes built to Title 24 standards.

"This is the most aggressive, comprehensive green program around today," claims Bell. "It's designed by builders for builders." CGB homes are subject to independent third-party inspections and



SolTerra's Granada Butterfly Home

diagnosis of energy features. The program also uses sustainable forest certifiers for wood building materials.

"It's a step in the right direction," says Michael Flannery, a principal in SolTerra Development, which is building three Mid-Century Modern-style "green" houses in Palm Springs. All are registered for certification by the US Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, or LEED.

LEED-ING THE WAY

Initially developed to promote environmentally-friendly design and construction practices for commercial buildings, the LEED rating system for homes was officially launched about a year ago to recognize builders for meeting high-energy performance standards. It offers credits accruing to four levels: certified, silver, gold and platinum. Three years after its launch, some 375 builders representing approximately 6,000 homes across the country were participating. Over 200 homes have been LEED certified.

For SolTerra, LEED registration was costly—nearly \$250,000—and required thousands of pages of paperwork. So why do it? "We want to be an innovative company," says Flannery. "The BIA's Green Builder is not as far-reaching. Energy efficiency is a serious trend, and we want to be ahead of the curve."

That sentiment is echoed by Dick Talbert, president of Burbank, California-based Talbert Development, Inc., which is building The Shoppes of Rancho Mirage—the Valley's first LEED pre-certified retail development, due for completion later this year. "It was a philosophical



Country Club Estates



The Plantation at Polo features CGB homes.

decision,” he says. “I want this to be a legacy for the community. It is a lot of extra work and cost, but it’s worth doing.”

“‘Green’ is often used as a marketing tactic without providing any credible practices,” says Sean Lockyer of AR+D, LLC, the Palm Springs design firm behind Coyote Heights, a new five-acre development of three homes in Palm Desert. “LEED sets new standards that validate the term ‘green’ and measure tangible components of design, building and living.” The sleek, modern Coyote Heights is on track for its own LEED certification.

Whether a project is LEED-certified or not, building green does add to the cost of building a home, and that can boost monthly mortgage payments. But builders agree that buyers recoup the expenditure in reduced utility bills.

“Investing five percent of the cost of a building in green materials will get you money back in utility savings,” says DNR’s Koulos. He tells the story of having installed five geothermal heating units in a massive, 28,000-square-foot house in Medina, Ohio, where winters can be harsh. “The units cost \$5,000 a piece,” says Koulos. “So the total was \$25,000. But the owner’s heating bill that winter was just \$700 a month. A house in the neighborhood half that size spent \$1300 a month the same year.”

Here in the Valley, the Imperial Irrigation District (IID), a utility that services the area east of Washington Street in La Quinta all the way to the Arizona border, offers incentives for the California Green Builder.

“The additional cost of a green-built house is around \$2,000,” says BIA’s Fred Bell. “The IID will give buyers a rebate of 35 to 40 cents a square foot, with a maximum of \$1,700. So the additional cost is nearly made up by the utility company itself.” (Utilities also offer rebates for energy-efficient appliances.)



Low-water landscaping at Country Club Estates.

On the commercial front, the rent being charged at The Shoppes of Rancho Mirage—\$3.35 per square foot—is more than offset by the money saved on energy, according to Dick Talbert. “The net cost of building a green commercial building is about 10 cents a square foot,” he says.

Many builders and professionals are convinced green is the color of the future. The Hoffmann Company of Concord, California,

has been developing The Plantation at Polo in Indio—a master-planned community featuring CGB homes. Contempo EcoModern Homes also is supporting CGB at its Country Club Estates development in Palm Springs. The homes here are 1,800-2,100 square feet and feature energy-saving materials and systems—ranging from concrete floors and dual-plane glass to photovoltaic solar panels and insulated structural wall and roof panels.

“It makes sense for us and for future generations,” says Rosella Hutchison, marketing manager for Contempo. “And it gives the buyer peace of mind.”

GREEN EDUCATION

So what does the future hold for the green construction trend? “It wouldn’t surprise me if in the next five years or so we saw some sort of LEED certification standard in building codes,” says developer Talbert. “By 2030, buildings will contribute just as much energy as they consume; there will be equilibrium.”

That, of course, doesn’t cover most existing construction. “How do you retrofit older product that wasn’t built to our new standards?” says Bell. “Palm Desert has about 30,000 houses in its existing stock, and about half of them are pre-Title 24. It’s a mature community. So is Palm Springs. These older homes are the least energy efficient, and there’s no retrofit plan. How do you make that updating financially feasible?”

“Being energy efficient is not enough; we need to get closer to energy independence,” says architect Patel, whose first LEED-certified commercial building, the Henderson Community Center for the City of Palm Desert, is due for completion this summer. “The planning and building departments from all cities should provide strong incentives and benefits to project teams. When the real estate market in the desert was booming in the past few years, most developers missed a great opportunity to build green projects so the consumer would have the opportunity to buy—and in turn, participate in the process.”



Green construction at Country Club Estates, a Palm Springs development by Contempo EcoModern Homes, incorporates structural wall and roof panels formed of compressed wood and foam, plus tankless water-heating systems. In the retail sector, Home Depot has introduced Eco Options, a labeling program classifying products by environmental performance.



A major retailer has heard the call of consumers looking to do their part. Home Depot has launched a labeling program in all of its US stores for “environmentally preferable” products. With Eco Options, special labeling identifies more than 2,500 products in five classes as having better environmental performance than others in their class: sustainable forestry, energy efficiency, healthy home, clean air and water conservation.

Perhaps not so far down the road, building “green” and conserving the environment in general could become an industry unto itself, as well as a source of jobs. The Coachella Valley Economic Partnership (CVEP) and UC Riverside’s Palm Desert campus have developed the Lyceum Project to promote sustainable growth and establish a green footprint for the entire area.

“The Lyceum Project began as a way to educate local leaders about the importance of renewable energy,” says John Soulliere, CVEP’s president and CEO. “This is a good place for green industry. We have an abundance of wind energy, thermal energy and hydrogen fuel. It’s the ideal region to develop an industry around alternative energy creation.”

The advantages of green building are obvious: reduced consumption of energy and natural resources; a healthier, more appealing environment both indoors and out; and a reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. It behooves our collective Desert community, and the world, to take them. ◀

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