



Catching the Green wave

It used to be called a cottage industry, but interest and awareness in environmentally sensitive or "green building" has achieved mainstream status among professional builders and homebuyers.

Q: How can I be sure a basement won't leak or an attic won't be stuffy and hot if I want to use it for living space?

A: Today's sophisticated products and systems for truly waterproof basements and comfortable attic areas enable those spaces to become living spaces instead of occasional-use quarters. For basements, elastic but tough waterproofing membranes, insulation and drainage boards, and perimeter drainage systems combine to shed and create a barrier against water intrusion, while heating and cooling systems can be "zoned" for smaller and precise areas of a house--each controlled by a separate thermostat--to make sure they remain comfortable and also energy-efficient.

There's no doubt that construction leaves an environmental footprint. By its nature homebuilding uses resources such as land and materials, as well as energy, water, and other resources. But during the last 30 years, there has been significant improvement in residential design, construction, materials, products, and systems to shrink that footprint. Professional builders are at the forefront of incorporating all that they can to lessen housing's impact on the environment.

In addition, a few cities and states regulate construction on environmentally sensitive parcels, such as near wildlife habitats. That being said, prevailing building codes neither specify the use of specific "green" products nor require homes to achieve a certain level of environmental impact. Instead, an increasing number of national and local green building programs and guidelines exist to help homebuyers and builders understand their options with regards to green building.

Once they have a chance to review green building guidelines, many builders discover that they are already building green to some degree. In fact, several standard or commodity building products when designed and applied properly, have been engineered to save energy and/or natural resources; their use in the construction of new homes is therefore inherently "green." Techniques and materials, such as increasing insulation or using thermally efficient windows, enables a builder to effectively reduce the energy consumption of the house, as well as the natural resources required to produce and supply that energy. By installing low-flow toilets and other water-saving appliances and faucets, a builder is conserving vital natural resources.

Though many environmentalists focus on timber harvesting as a symbol of environmental impact, the fact is that wood-based products, including wall studs, floor beams, and roof trusses needed for the home's structural frame, are manufactured from a renewable natural resource: trees.

In addition, improved engineering of composite lumber products further reduces the impact housing construction has on our forest resources. High-tech factories allow lumber suppliers to get more useful products out of each tree and lessen the number of finished lumber components, such as studs and floor joists, required to build a house. So-called "advanced framing" techniques further reduce the amount of lumber needed for home construction and also make room for additional energy-saving and resource-efficient methods and materials.

Q: Am I liable for accidents that occur during the construction of my house?

A: In most cases, no. Builders and their trade contractors carry liability and worker's compensation insurance against job site accidents. In addition, they are regulated by the federal Occupational Safety & Health Administration (OSHA), as well as their insurers, to maintain a safe workplace, eliminate hazards, and train their workers in safe work habits and emergency response. Make sure that you follow your builder's safety guidelines and procedures should you visit the job site.

Another component of green building are products and systems that improve indoor air quality. These products regulate and refresh indoor air, remove natural and common pollutants, and reduce and vent moisture. Many of the mechanical and passive systems once used exclusively for homeowners with allergies and other sensitivities are now in the mainstream.

Clearly, there are a growing number and variety of building products and finishes, from engineered lumber to low-voltage lighting, that are more prevalent and popular. Their move into the mainstream is due to the public's interest in reducing environmental impact, and they are steadily more affordable and available to builders. Research indicates clearly that homebuyers prefer "green" products and houses, but only if such measures do not significantly add to the price of their new house; slowly but surely, the price and supply of environmentally sensitive products is becoming competitive.

As more "green" products, finishes, and systems enter the market, they will begin to show up in virtually all types of houses and in every price range. As professional builders, we're always interested in ways to build better homes, increase housing value, and exceed client expectations, including a concern for the environment.

Warm regards,

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