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Green Building

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Downsizing Space, Upsizing Global Conscious

By Stephanie Regalado

The old adage, bigger is better, has never been so, well, old. With increased building and energy costs, people are asking more out of their homes with rooms and areas that are more flexible. Homeowners are getting rid of rarely used rooms that are devoted to a single purpose. They are taking advantage of outdoor living spaces that allow them to expand their living areas without oversizing their homes. Landscaping compliments such spaces with native plantings, drought-tolerant grasses, shrubs, and shade trees. Community gardens, composting, farmers' markets, and even small urban 'farming' (gardening, raising chickens, etc) are helping them get in touch with nature again.

"Homes are becoming smaller," says Thomas Angell, architect, AIA. Angell has been in the building industry for 28 years, an architect for 19 years and in his own practice for 18 years. "This reverses a decades-old trend of "bigger is better."

"The benefits of smaller, more efficient spaces is simple—less cost up front and less cost to maintain," shares Jeff Fountain, owner and principal architect at Copeland Architecture & Construction, Inc. "From that starting point, many alternatives become more available and easier to incorporate into the project. Incentives from utility companies and government agencies are great which can bring more competition to the market and better pricing as products become more available."

Green Building by Definition

Green building has many meanings to many different people. Green principles can address such issues as climate change; preserving the environment, local eco-systems, and fostering wildlife habitat and biodiversity; minimizing air, water and land pollution; greater energy efficiency; conserving natural resources like timber, water, and top soil (i.e., supporting local farmers and smart developments); our health; a greater sense of community; social justice; smarter transportation; and less waste.

"Younger generations understand the connection between human activity and climate change," says Angell. "Our choices in how we work, live and play has a profound impact on our world. Young people are growing up knowing how we can make a difference. They are seeing the errors of the way we have been sprawling and over-consuming. Empty-nesters and soon-to-be retirees want to make smart investments in their homes. They see green building as the proper way to build or remodel their homes one last time in their lives. They do not need big homes. They want their homes healthy and they need them to be energy and water efficient."

The Benefits of Going Green

"The most important reasons for building sustainably are environmental, but the most immediately compelling incentive for our clients is financial," says Sam Rodell, architect, AIA who began working in architecture 36 years ago, and has worked as a principal architect in private practice for 30 years. "Most are surprised at how much money they will save as they reduce their carbon footprint." Rodell is working on an institutional project and anticipates savings for the owner of six figures annually, with very minimal additional initial cost of construction. And at the other end of the spectrum, he and his team are also building a two-bedroom home they know will use less energy for heating and cooling annually than the appliances in the kitchen of a typical U.S. household. "The increase in initial cost of this project is only about ten percent over a 'built to code' baseline cost, which will be quickly recovered by reduced ownership expenses. Both of these projects will be far less vulnerable to increasing energy costs in the future," he says.

Green is the Color of the Future

Rodell's office is designing high performance buildings that require a fraction of the energy they are accustomed to using; therefore the demand for energy is reduced to a trickle. Increasingly, these buildings are actually capable of generating more energy than they use throughout the year. "This has two powerful implications," says Rodell. "First, moving to renewable and clean energy sources to provide for these facilities becomes truly feasible in our climate. Second, we see that buildings have the potential to essentially become little power plants to contribute to a distributed power grid, which opens up the potential for radical changes in how we regionally manage energy production and consumption."

Angell recommends taking a look at our surroundings to see what is available for energy, water, and shelter. "What does our region offer in energy potential—wind, solar, biomass, small hydro, biofuels from agri-waste, etc? What does it offer




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in natural resources for locally produced building materials? We need to work further to lower our carbon footprint,” he says.

Homeowners will continue to take advantage of smart technology, says Angell. Appliances, water, and energy needs will be integrated with the utility needs of the community. “This will help to balance the power loads, which will help to reduce the overall energy required. We cannot overlook the benefits of passive strategies like passive solar, daylighting, thermal mass, natural ventilation, rainwater harvesting, xeriscaping, permaculture, and greywater systems.”

Angell strongly believes communities should also be more walk-able, thereby healthier. Infrastructure needs to give priority to pedestrians, bikers, telecommuting, and mass transit. “Mixed-use neighborhoods need to offer places to work, live and play, which will yield a greater sense of community. Low-impact developments should minimize streets by clustering homes and their infrastructure. This will help preserve natural open spaces, among other benefits,” he says.

“The topic is truly an endless discussion,” says Fountain. “The best we can do is keep exploring, keep refining and keep pushing. Maybe ‘green’ will just become a color again and ‘green building’ will just be ‘building’ as it should be incorporating good design practices and building techniques.”

Rodell adds that if we wish to live in a society characterized by abundance rather than scarcity, we need to shift our approach. “Simply thinking about sustainability as ‘doing without’ is counterproductive,” he says. “We need to refine and promote economically and environmentally healthy new patterns that can be broadly embraced as progressive, practical, and desirable. Just as surely as we designed and built our way toward deeply entrenched patterns of squandering resources, blighting our landscape, and creating unhealthy spaces to live and work in, we can design and build our way toward places that are sustainable, healthy, and delightful—one project at a time.”

For more information:

DSIRE has a website that outlines the grants, loans, rebates and tax incentives available to homeowners and businesses, that go green, from federal and state governments and utility companies. www.dsireusa.org.

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