

Green Design for Newly Constructed Homes

by Michelle Gilboa Lohr, Austin

It doesn't take long to get used to the funny buzz words when you hang around green loving people. "green living", "green design" and "green building". But just what is green design?

Green design is truly a component of ecological considerations in construction and interior design all in one. We let the material drive the process of design thereby creating harmony with the planet and the community. But most importantly it's the sustainable material used in synchronization with the mood and style of the home that we are designing.



Green design follows a few basic principles:

Energy efficiency. Before one starts building a home they should consult with a green architect for the best planning to create energy efficiency. No or very few windows on the west side of the home. Foam or other types of insulation. Solar panels, which must face south to maximize the use of sun energy. Roofing material. All these issues and more need to be addressed prior to starting construction.

Affects on quality of life. Green design strives to use the least toxic material which is a major element of indoor air quality in the home. This depends on the material used indoors from type of wood, cabinetry, carpeting/flooring and of course paint. The issue of paint is easiest to fix and inexpensive compared to carpeting and cabinetry. Ordinary indoor primers, paint and stains are known to have toxins which literally kill or damage living cells. Some lead to various diseases such as cancer and Parkinson's disease. Certainly, exterior paint has its affects too, however, since people mostly live indoors and are exposed to painted surfaces on a daily basis- the focus should be interior paint. Paints made from natural ingredients contain mostly water, plants dyes, plant oils and other naturals. They are odorless and not toxic. Another option is Milk Paint made mostly from milk protein and water. Almost all paint manufacturers offer at least one type of low or no VOC (Volatile Organic Compounds - the bad stuff that gets in the air of the home). Local Benjamin Moore stores offer Natura® Interior Paint, Sherwin Williams has their Harmony line. Both are zero VOC paint and quite affordable.

Recycled or recyclable products. The use of metal roofs in Austin has increased tremendously. This is because a metal roof, according to Austin Energy is a radiant barrier recyclable material. A radiant barrier is a type of material which creates a barrier against heat and cold, thus preserving energy for the home. Austin Energy even provides a rebate system for the use of recyclable material. Used wood, barn wood, timbers from the industrial forest, floorboards and beams from older structures is perceived recyclable - because there is no need to use resources to create it or use energy to re-create it from scratch. All of the energy that is spent in manufacturing and transporting something is thus saved. The wood, iron and different raw construction materials that would be taken from the earth can be re-used rather than created from new. In fact, used wood and iron can be more expensive than new so it's up to the consumer to make the final decision whether it is worthwhile to use from an economical perspective. Many green products available today carry relatively higher prices than conventional products. Once they become more common and used more by the general public, prices will eventually come down.

Obviously, there are other elements in green design not mentioned in this article. For newly constructed homes in Austin there is a star certification program assigned by Austin energy which rates the home Green from one star to five stars.

For further green building information provided by Austin Energy, go to austinenrgy.com.

Michelle Gilboa Lohr is a registered builder in Austin and owns GmM Lohr Homes Inc. with her husband, Gill. They will be exhibiting at the 5th Annual Austin Green Living Expo on April 23-25 at the Austin Convention Center. To find out more go to www.gnmlohrrhomes.com. See ad on page 9.

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