

September 3, 2008

Building green is good for the environment and the pocketbook

By *DARREN DIMEDIO*
For the *Courier-Post*

While there is a perception in New Jersey that green building is a relatively new phenomenon, its main tenets -- the minimization of waste, improved energy efficiency, efficient use of resources and "recyclability" -- are concepts that have been widely embraced by successful building material dealers for decades.

Cost driven

Many of the veterans in the New Jersey Building Materials Dealers Association think back to the 1970s, when ecology awareness and the rising cost of oil were popular topics of discussion. Customers began asking us how to make their homes more energy efficient through the use of new and different building materials.

We were certainly impressed by those who took green building to the extreme, constructing Earth ships -- homes built with old tires filled with dirt. A few of these ships still exist, amazingly, tucked along side roads in Sussex County and in the Pinelands.

But while the 1970s was an era of some hits and many, many misses, it required dealers to seek materials that focused not just on functionality, quality and unit price. We had to include energy efficiency into the mix, explaining to our customers the long-term savings and value of using these products, rather than just the dollars and cents on the initial invoice.

Green building has certainly experienced its growing pains over the years. There have been many attempts, for example, to perfect the solar home.

Dropping of oil prices in the early 1990s created a shift away from green building, although many progressive builders remained resolute and are now leading a reinvigorated movement.

As we prepare for a new decade, with record energy prices in New Jersey and beyond, we are entering a golden era for green building. The trend is projected to grow as a share of the overall residential market from just 2 percent in 2005 to between 12 percent and 20 percent in 2012, according to research presented at a recent National Green Building Conference in New Orleans.

This surge is coming not only from environmentalists, but from families who want relief from high energy bills.

Building basics

These are some green building basics that will greatly improve the performance of a home:

Lumber remains the original "green" material, as it is natural, biodegradable, cost-effective, renewable and helps a home breathe throughout the seasons.

Select windows and doors with good insulation values, such as double- and triple-paned windows and doors with insulating foam cores. Greener windows also have insulating gas (such as argon) between the panes, which insulates better than air. In addition, most windows are available with virtually invisible glass coatings, called "low-e," which reflect radiant heat and provide protection from ultraviolet sun rays.

The best windows and doors not only provide insulation through the glazing or glass area, but also around the movable parts, such as the sash of the window or door to minimize air infiltration. The best glazing in the world is useless if air leaks between the sash and the frame.

Incorporating building materials that are effective, durable, sustainable and nontoxic should be the goal. Seek bamboo, cork and cotton insulation. Recycled glass countertops can lessen a family's impact on the environment. Other materials, such as no or low-toxic emission paints and stains, and formaldehyde-free cabinets, can help improve indoor air quality.

Geothermal heating and cooling systems pull warm or cool air from the Earth and pump it into the house for a natural heating, ventilation and air-conditioning system. Solar panels can generate enough electricity on a sunny day to allow you to sell power back to your electric company. While these investments involve a high initial price tag, eventually the savings will cover their cost.

Remodeling to reduce a family's carbon footprint and to save money on energy costs is an idea whose time has come.

The writer, who lives in Haddonfield, is a manager of Dubell Lumber Co and a board trustee of the New Jersey Building Materials Dealers Association.