

Posted on Sat, Oct. 01, 2005

Green for the masses

SUNSET'S IDEA HOUSES SHOWCASE LATEST ENERGY-SAVING INNOVATIONS, WHICH ARE BECOMING MORE

AFFORDABLE

By Holly Hayes
Mercury News

Maybe you've been reading about green building methods and materials and thinking that living the eco-friendly lifestyle is a great idea -- if you're made of money.

Think again.

On Friday, Sunset magazine opens the doors to its latest Idea Houses, a side-by-side pair showcasing all manner of recycled or sustainable building materials that demonstrate how mainstream manufacturers are jumping on the green bandwagon.

One of the houses is fully furnished and decorated with contemporary flair. The other is a demonstration house that has cutaways to show such normally hidden features as formaldehyde-free insulation, radiant roof barriers and the various engineered wood products used in construction.

The two-story structures in a new east Menlo Park subdivision are called ``zero-energy'' houses because they produce as much energy as they consume. If that sounds like something out of Tomorrowland, it's not. Every item in each house -- from the tankless, on-demand water heaters to the solar roof tiles to the satellite-linked automatic sprinkler system -- is readily available in today's marketplace.

``The technology has improved so much and the prices are coming way down,'' says Sean Misskelley, project manager for Clarum Homes, the Palo Alto-based builder of the project. ``It's finally practical to incorporate all this great stuff in production construction. These are not custom homes."''

The six-acre development eventually will have 47 zero-energy houses and a park, Misskelley says. Twenty of the houses will be sold in a lottery to qualified Menlo Park residents as ``affordable'' -- \$375,000 or less, Misskelley says. The project is expected to be completed early next year.

Sunset estimates that building green typically adds about 6 percent to the initial cost of a house. But figure in the long-term savings on energy -- not to mention the less-tangible benefits, such as better air quality -- and being eco-savvy starts to make cents as well as sense.

Oh, and did we mention that the houses are beautiful?

Designer Pamela Pennington of Palo Alto has worked with the Sunset design team to prove that going green can be elegant, from the warm chestnut-toned hues of the bamboo strand flooring to the rich colors of the recycled glass tiles to the imaginative kitchen cabinet doors that have reed-like thatch encased in recycled polyester resin.

``Oh, and isn't this fun?'' says Pennington, pointing to the recycled-ceramic tile floor in an upstairs bathroom that looks like lush, green grass. The manufacturer uses a non-chemical photo process to get the look.

Other floor treatments in both houses include a low-pile, industrial-looking carpeting made from recycled soda bottles. In the demonstration house, there are even more ideas for going green on the floor: old-fashioned linoleum in updated colors, plus natural wool, sisal and sea grass carpeting.

Walls get the green treatment, too, with contemporary tones rendered in low VOC (volatile organic compound) paints throughout.

``It used to be that the range of colors in low VOC paints was pretty limited,'' Pennington says. ``But now, for example,

all of the Kelly Moore paints are available in low VOC." She chose a sophisticated palette that includes punches of pistachio, cayenne and slate blue.

In the kitchens, countertops are clad in a smooth, seamless material made of quartz crystals, with backsplash details of iridescent recycled glass tiles. Cabinets are made of wheatboard with knobs fashioned of cast aluminum and recycled glass. The demonstration house has many other samples of green kitchen materials. Appliances are all energy-efficient models.

The houses also show off the latest in stylish -- yes, stylish -- fluorescent lighting in many rooms. This is particularly noteworthy, since new state building codes that go into effect today mandate that new construction must have 50 percent of its light output from fluorescent fixtures.

"But look how cool these can-style lights are in the kitchen ceiling," says Peter O. Whiteley, Sunset's senior home writer and jack-of-all-trades on the Idea Houses. "And they've made these fixtures so you can't take out the fluorescent bulb and replace it with a regular incandescent bulb."

All of the rooms are equipped with programmable switches that automatically turn off lights when sensors indicate no one is in the room.

Outdoors, the small gardens are landscaped with water-wise plants accented with blue and green mulch made of tumbled recycled glass and tumbled pieces of terra cotta. One garden has a composting station, a worm bin, recycled rubber mulch and a small fountain powered by a solar panel. The other has interlocking pavers used to build raised beds and walkways.

"The pavers are permeable so water trickles down through them to keep the water on site and out of the storm sewer," says Whiteley, who also points out the small patch of fake lawn that looks amazingly real and a path of round pods built out of synthetic lumber.

Two houses, plenty of ideas. Which is exactly the point, Misskelley says.

"We're hoping that people visiting these houses will find green ideas they can incorporate in their own homes and lifestyles for not much more money than non-green materials and methods."

Contact Holly Hayes at hhayes@mercurynews.com or (408) 920-5374.