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Luxury homes go green in Danville

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DANVILLE — All that glitters is green, at least at new "environ-home" community Hansen Lane Estates, with ten luxury homes in the \$2 million range featuring apparently every energy-saving feature imaginable.

The residences, currently being built by Palo Alto developer Clarum Homes, comprise the first registered LEED For Homes production housing community in Contra Costa County, and will come complete with a Toyota Prius hybrid vehicle in every garage.

LEED, or Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, is a set of standards from the U.S. Green Building Council used to certify that buildings are environmentally friendly. The homes use solar power, with solar hot water heaters, special heating and cooling systems, Web-based irrigation controllers and a host of other features.

"We want this to be ground zero for the green building movement in Danville," said Norman Rhett, who sold the 4-acre parcel to Clarum in 2006, retaining two lots for himself and his wife Kay. The couple sold to John Suppes, Clarum's founder, because he has been creating green residences for ten years.

Rhett, whose parents bought the land in 1956 and who has lived there off and on for 50 years, cruised down brand-new Rhett Place with Kay in their RAV4 all-electric EV for the housing development's official launch in Thursday. They have purchased two of the homes for themselves, and two more have already sold.

The tan-colored model home, first of the ten to be completed, has a stained-brown, bare concrete floor that resembles tiling at first glance. "The concrete slabs absorb heat all day long," helping keep the house cool in three-digit Danville temperatures, said Steve Brennan, an engineer with Davis Energy Group and LEED specialist who helped design the homes' heating and cooling systems.

But the most striking element of the 3,628-square-foot, four-bedroom house is the light, which streams in from the sun-drenched courtyard through floor-to-ceiling glass doors and from the sky through solar tubes and double-paned windows.

"My mother was an activist architect. Her concept was that buildings shouldn't require light during the day," said Suppes as he dug into a salad offered along other refreshments in the model home's gleaming kitchen at the launch party. The developer estimated that he has built some 1,000 energy-efficient homes since Clarum, founded in 1994, went green in 1998.

Pausing in front of the house's six-foot-tall, two-foot-wide, 120-gallon Phoenix solar hot water heater, Brennan said, "The gas heater is halfway up the tank and only heats the top half of the tank. On cloudy days you can heat the water in the upper half with the gas heater. On sunny days, the solar panels on the roof heat the water in the bottom half, which then heats the entire tank because heat rises."

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Some housing developments prohibit solar panels because they are deemed unsightly, but Brennan points out that the two hot-water heater panels are almost flush with the roof and nearly the same color. The photovoltaic panels for the electric system are equally unobtrusive, unnoticeable from the front of the house.

"The insulation in these walls is ten inches thick," said Stephen Brennan, brandishing a sample block of Styrofoam insulation inside half-inch strips of plywood.

Though Styrofoam was once considered evil because of the chemicals used in manufacturing and its use as a throwaway take-out food container, those chemicals aren't used any longer and its long life is useful as home insulation, Brennan said.

Asked why anyone rich enough to afford a \$2 million home would care about saving energy, Rhett said, "Because they care about their legacy and their children's world. Because they are worried that if this country continues with business as usual, the world they grew up in will be damaged irreparably, if not destroyed."

Brian Hogge, a Brentwood real estate broker at Alain Pinel Realtors who deals with properties of \$1 million and up, concurred with Brennan.

"I get requests once a month for houses in the million-dollar price range that are also environmentally sensitive," said Hogge, noting that such homes are a big draw regardless of price.

"I don't think it's the savings. It's the feeling they get knowing they are doing something to save the environment and give something back," Hogge said.

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clarum homes Founded: 1994 Phone: 650-322-7069 Address: 599 College Ave., Palo Alto Founder: John Suppes Web site: www.clarum.com/ 2007 Revenue: \$30 million Employees: 15-40 depending on activity Business: Designing, building energy-saving homes; retrofitting existing homes for energy savings

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