

A Green Building Revolution is Hitting Home—and Office, Reports E “The Environmental Magazine

by Bend Weekly News Sources

The green building movement is starting to make serious progress, reports E “ The Environmental Magazine in its January/February 2007 cover story (now posted at www.emagazine.com). Eco-friendly construction is on the rise, from single-family houses and planned communities to schools, hospitals and other large built environments. Today, five percent of new commercial construction meets standards set by the U.S. Green Building Council’s Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design program (LEED), a voluntary, consensus-based standard for developing high-performance, sustainable buildings. Ten percent of new homes satisfy the federal government’s Energy Star guidelines, meaning they’re nearly one-third more energy-efficient than regulations require. Still, considering that U.S. buildings put out about a third of the country’s greenhouse gasses, at the rate green building is penetrating the market today it will be many years before we cut emissions by the 70 percent thought necessary to stabilize global climate. The green building movement expands on the 1970s solar-energy craze, when drastic oil shortages spurred interest in sun-powered homes and President Jimmy Carter installed solar panels on the White House (later removed by Ronald Reagan). When oil prices came back down, interest waned. But by the early 1990s, the green building movement took off again, broadening its focus to consider other issues such as the environmental impacts of materials and whether the buildings offer health benefits, according to Alex Wilson, president of Vermont-based BuildingGreen, executive editor of Environmental Building News and author of *Your Green Home*. A number of cities around the country, including San Francisco (and neighboring Pleasanton, Berkeley and San Mateo), Boston, Seattle and Scottsdale, Arizona, are leading the way with laws that require new public buildings be green. So far, 54 cities and 23 federal agencies have adopted LEED standards for buildings, says Bill Browning, senior fellow for Rocky Mountain Institute and co-author of *Green Development: Integrating Ecology and Real Estate*. Obstacles abound. Part of the problem is the resistance to change and refusal by some professionals to learn new methods. And the technology will continue to cost more until economies of scale are realized. And there are doubters. Some question whether the term “green building” is too easily co-opted for marketing purposes. Some builders, they charge, do little more than erect townhouses that increase urban density rather than build energy-efficient products that are truly lighter on the land. Critics wonder whether efficiency standards, when applied, can be objectively proven to deliver desired results -- such as lower electric bills. Historic preservationists bristle at a perceived bias toward new edifices thrown up at the expense of older buildings that could instead be sustainably retrofitted while maintaining the character of a community. Buildings are definitely energy hogs. While the SUV is the environmental bad-boy symbol, buildings consume far more energy than cars and trucks. It’s estimated that commercial and residential buildings in the U.S. consume 65 percent of all electricity, as well as 12 percent of drinkable water and 40 percent of all raw materials. “I believe that buildings are the worst thing that people do to the environment,” says Rob Watson, former senior scientist at Natural Resources Defense Council. “We don’t associate the fact that when we turn on a light switch, coal is mined in a mine. It goes to a power plant that comes up the stack as acid rain producing sulfur dioxide, planet-cooking carbon dioxide.” “The new green building movement arises from the realization that we can’t go on living as we have in the past: that treating the environment in general and energy in particular as afterthoughts no longer makes sense,” says author Bill McKibben. He was marking last October’s opening of the 46-story glass-and-steel Hearst Tower in New York City. The building required 20 percent less steel than a conventional skyscraper and is made of 90 percent recycled material. Sensors there switch off lights when no one is in a room. “They’re sensible, cost-effective, obvious [measures],” McKibben said. “Someday they’ll be code. But for now they’re noble, pioneering examples.”

A Green Building Revolution is Hitting Home—and Office, Reports E “The Environmental Magazine by Bend Weekly News Sources