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Top Five Green Building Trends of 2009

Building/Remodeling Green Building

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occupants.

When the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC) developed its now ubiquitous Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Green Building Rating System™ in 1998, so-called “green building” was little more than a barely audible, practically invisible blip on the average builder’s radar. Now, more than 10 years later, green building is considered great building—not just for its environmental benefits, but also for its economic impact, as green buildings are increasingly making money for builders and saving money for

The result is a massive increase in the number of builders who are interested in building green, and in the number of customers who are interested in buying green, according to Carlos Martin, assistant vice president of the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB). “What we’re seeing now is a mainstreaming of green,” he says.

Even as it’s growing, however, green building is changing, to the benefit of the Earth, the economy and the end user, suggests green builder David Hayes, CEO of San Francisco-based Skyline Construction. “Green building is still in its infancy,” he says. “We just graduated from high school and we’re about to learn more.”

In order to stay ahead of the learning curve, consider the following five trends that experts say will shape green building in 2009 and beyond:

1. Green Business Booms

As builders look to differentiate themselves within the confines of a down economy, green building is becoming just as much about strategy as sustainability, according to Martin.

“The first green trend we’re seeing is actually looking at the business of green,” he says, “which includes not just building, but also project management, sales and marketing—all those business-related areas in which green can help builders who are going through the

downturn improve and in many cases salvage their businesses.”

According to Martin, as builders look for a competitive edge, they’re seeking more education, thus paving the way for new credentials—like the Green Building Certification Institute’s LEED Accredited Professional and NAHB’s Certified Green Professional designations—and new conferences, such as NAHB’s National Green Building Conference.

2. Green Gets Defined, Then Refined

If 2008 was the year for many builders to go green, then 2009 will be the year for most of them to define green, suggests green builder Walker Harris, a principal of Durham, N.C.-based Sustainable Building Solutions.

“Think about this,” he says. “You go to the grocery store and you can buy low-fat crackers. Now we’re starting to learn that some of those low-fat products aren’t actually good for you, and may be misleading. This past year there’s been a lot going on with the green label and people are starting to ask, ‘Is that really green?’ and ‘What does green really mean?’”

In order to answer the questions, and fight so-called “greenwashing” by marketers, third-party verification and ratings systems like the National Green Building Standard—not only for green buildings, but also for green products inside those buildings—are becoming more important and more desirable, according to Martin.

3. Green Building Gives More for Less

Although third-party verification is increasingly necessary, formal certification no longer is. “LEED certification is useful from a marketing and sales perspective,” Hayes says. “It’s no longer necessary, though. Now we’re seeing companies do all that’s required for LEED, but without hiring expensive consultants or putting in a formal application. They’re shadowing the LEED process to get all the benefits at half the cost.”

Indeed, because the business case for green includes long-term savings, many companies are focusing less on the PR of green and more on the ROI. Martin therefore predicts a rise in green remodels and in deconstruction—two green building disciplines that can produce significant long-term savings over new construction and traditional demolition.

That same hunger for return on investment is producing an increase in the demand for green building consultants and energy auditors, according to Harris, who says audits that assess a building’s performance in pursuit of maximum energy savings are becoming an integral part of the green building process.

4. Green Materials Evolve

Of course, the physical materials that green builders use are also changing. If 2008 was about surface materials like light bulbs, tile and flooring, Harris suggests, 2009 will be about internal materials. “Builders should showcase the ‘bones’ instead of the ‘bling,’” he says.

To that end, Harris says builders will turn their attention to energy-efficient HVAC systems and to spray foam insulation, while Hayes says they'll be embracing energy-efficient doors and windows, as well as eco-friendly alternatives to drywall.

Meanwhile, Eric Corey Freed, author of *Green Building & Remodeling for Dummies*, anticipates a boom in the use of "biocomposite" materials such as plastic that's made from corn, which can be used to make everything from cabinets to doors.

5. Governments Incentivize Green

Equally important as where green building is going is under whose direction. While consumer demand has fueled green building progress in the last several years, government mandates and incentives may fuel them further going forward.

In fact, Congress included in its \$787 billion American Recovery and Reinvestment Act—passed into law in February—several provisions that are likely to shape green building in the coming years, including loan guarantees for renewable energy projects, as well as tax credits for homeowners who add energy-efficient windows, furnaces and air conditioners to their homes.

"It's hard to say what's going to happen on the federal level," Hayes concludes, "but we're seeing local green building ordinances pick up left, right and center."