

Going green a growing trend among homeowners

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The bathroom tiles are recycled wine bottles. The hardwood floors are sustainable bamboo. And the sprawling garden gets sprinkled with rainwater collected in 300-gallon barrels.

From its recycled plastic deck to its solar-paneled roof, everything in and about the 2,500-square-foot home on exhibit at the Museum of Science and Industry has a green story -- with the goal of showing the public how easy it can be to incorporate environmental sustainability into their own abodes.

"Green should be for everyone," said Michelle Kaufmann, the Oakland, Calif.-based architect who designed the SmartHome. "If it's only for a few, what's the point?"

It appears the public is catching on.

Green building is expected to represent 6 percent of the residential construction industry in 2008, according to a survey conducted by McGraw-Hill Construction Research & Analytics for the U.S. Green Building Council. In 2005, about 2 percent of new residential construction was considered "green."

Green housing is growing even while the overall housing market is suffering, said Nate Kredich, the council's vice president for residential market development.

"It is happening," Kredich said. "It's out of museums now. But the industry needs to do a better job of getting information into people's hands when they're looking for it."

The goal of the Chicago exhibit, which runs through January, is to show visitors that saving energy and conserving resources are within reach of everyone -- whether it's an entire house or a single feature, museum officials said.

The modular home, which Kaufmann said uses less than half the energy and a third of the water of traditional homes, includes a kitchen with a countertop composter and a sink made from concrete and fly ash, a byproduct of burning coal. Water from the bathroom sink is diverted to the toilet, where it is used for flushing. A bicycle in the children's bedroom must be pedaled for 30 minutes to charge a battery to power video games.

Visitors receive a resource guide that tells about function of each feature, how they're assembled and where they can be purchased. The bicycle system, for example, was put together from parts bought on an electronics Web site.

"We tried to look for ideas in every choice that we make in our homes ... hoping that everyone who goes through it will be inspired to make some change on some level," Kaufmann said. "Some people will walk away and want to do an entire new home or some people will think when they go for their towels next and go for organic linens."

Jasmine Davis, 23, of Park Forest, who visited the home with her mother said the exhibit gave her tips for her own apartment. "I like not making a negative impact on the Earth," Davis said.

"It's got so much to be said for it because it uses nature and natural materials," said Robert Richards, 70, of Santa Monica, Calif., who visited with friends. "It's open. You bring the outside in and you can even bring the inside out. It's a house built for humans. It's plausible in real life."

David Johnston, who owns an international green building consulting firm in Boulder, Colo., said the exhibit is a great way to educate the public about green possibilities, but he hopes that the home's ultramodern architecture doesn't leave visitors with "the impression that green building has to be modern, weird, solar, ugly."

"One of the things that's fundamental to green building is that it can look like anything. It can be a regular Craftsman house or a Cape Cod house in New England or an adobe house in Santa Fe. You don't have to change what the home looks like to make it green."

Anne Rashford, the museum's SmartHome project manager, said nobody expects that people will try to recreate the exhibit home.

"But we hope people will make informed decisions when they're building, when they're renovating," Rashford said.

While it can be tough for homeowners to figure out where they're going to get the most green payback for their money, Kaufmann and Johnston agree overall energy usage and building materials will attract homeowners to a green house.

Johnston suggests rolling energy-saving features into the mortgage by choosing quality insulation and solar panels. Kaufmann says homeowners could spend \$1,000 on an energy-metering system that provides a dashboard for power usage.

"Once I can see in real time how my behavior translates to my usage, I can make changes," she said. "These homes will actually cost less."

Johnston, who has written a book on green building, said being energy efficient beyond existing building codes, conserving resources, recycling and improving indoor air quality truly make homes green.

"If you're very clever, if you're a do-it-yourself kind of person, you can do one room at a time and achieve your ultimate goal," he said.

Kaufmann said homeowners are ready.

"It's no longer a question if people want to go green or not. They do," Kaufmann said. "People are wanting an alternative."
