

Home Green Home

The benefits of sustainable living | *By Iyna Bort Caruso*



When Vivek Wadhwa and his wife came across a newly built four-bedroom home while house hunting in Menlo Park, California, they were taken by its cathedral ceilings, open architecture and stunning light. Turns out it wasn't just another pretty home—it was a “passive home,” designed to meet a sky-high standard of energy efficiency.

● “I didn't even know what a passive home was,” Wadhwa says. ● The Mission Revival residence looks no different from others in the neighborhood, yet it is engineered and constructed as a high-performance home. It utilizes a solar-powered system for heating and air-conditioning, and an insulated wall system keeps indoor temperatures constant, between 67 and 74 degrees year-round. “My only complaint is that because there are no drafts or leaks, you have to open the doors to find out what the weather is like outside,” Wadhwa jokes. ● Energy efficiency isn't the home's only environmental benefit: A satellite-controlled irrigation system monitors the weather and adjusts watering accordingly; interiors feature reclaimed woods and renewable materials such as bamboo; and all finishes are formaldehyde-free. ● Wadhwa says buying the house required a leap of faith. “With a regular home, you can ask the owners what it's like to live there,” he says. “There was no one to ask about this—it was a new experiment, a new concept, the first of its kind. I decided to take the risk.” It paid off, perhaps most dramatically in the Wadhwas' utility bills: While their neighbors may pay \$800–\$1,000 a month for electricity, the Wadhwas pay a whopping \$4.32.

Changing Homeowner Priorities

Once upon a time, living green meant living off the grid, doing with less and sacrificing on creature comforts. Technology has changed all that and provided the opportunity to reset consumers' expectations. Experts say that sustainability these days is not about sacrifice, but an improved quality of life. These homes are more comfortable and healthier, and the trend is no short-term fad: According to one study, green homes are expected to grow to between 29 percent and 38 percent of the market by 2016.

Just a few short years ago, the position held by C.R. Herro hadn't been conceived: vice president of environmental affairs. Herro works at Meritage Homes, headquartered in Scottsdale, Arizona. The company, the ninth-largest builder in the United States, designs every home to be twice as energy efficient as federal Energy Star (the government's certification for energy efficiency) requirements.

Herro says that until relatively recently, home-buying decisions had been largely based on floor plan, price point and location. Now, buyers are discovering that sustainability is another key consideration. “Homes consume twice the energy and twice the water as homeowners actually utilize,” he says. “Over a 30-year mortgage, they waste more than \$70,000 in utilities. These [green] improvements change the economics. They can make a home safer, more comfortable and healthier, and enable consumers to make a more informed decision.”

Buyers are increasingly paying attention to the insulation behind the walls, the efficiency of the appliances and the materials used in the finishes. Herro says that whether you're talking



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“Passive homes” are designed to meet some of the highest standards of energy efficiency.



COURTESY: BROOKS KOLB, ASLA, LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT

Water and maintenance costs can be cut by planting water-conserving or drought-tolerant plants, such as in this hillside garden in Seattle.

Right: Houses can be sustainable as well as elegant, as demonstrated by this bathroom with compact fluorescent lighting and Forest Stewardship Council-certified wood paneling.

about economics, energy efficiency or aesthetics, a green home is always a good decision—and one that appeals to a wide demographic. Young, first-time buyers have been raised to understand the principles of “reduce, reuse and recycle,” and they support companies whose corporate ethics align with their own. Active, older adults come at it from another angle: They’ve been paying rising utility bills for years, even decades, and are ready for more-efficient solutions.

Sustainable homes incorporate a range of systems, tactics and practices. They can use reclaimed building materials, water-conserving measures and multizone geothermal HVAC (heating, ventilating and air-conditioning) systems, for instance, to lessen the environmental impact. But sustainability goes beyond ecology; it’s about the social, cultural and economic impact, as well, says Matthew Coates, president of Coates Design Architects in Seattle.

“To be truly sustainable, we must have a triple

bottom-line mentality,” Coates says. “We must think about how our decision to build or renovate impacts the environment, our neighbors and our communities, and also the local economy.” Coates coined the term “responsible architecture,” referring to both an approach and a goal. “The days of looking at buildings as machines for consumption are gone—instead, we need to eliminate the concept of waste and see every single piece of what we’re doing as a resource,” he says.

“We need to get away from the idea of being wasteful and ensure that all materials are repurposed, salvaged or reused—and that all materials are recyclable, and at the end of their life span can be taken apart and turned into new building components,” diverting these materials from landfills.

Doing the Math

For sustainability to gain critical mass, those on the front lines say, certain misconceptions require undoing and certain answers need clarification, such as: Does it come at a price?

It depends on how you do the math, says Coates. Some practices are free, such as orienting a new home on the parcel in a way to take advantage of breezes for



LARA SWIMMER, COURTESY: COATES DESIGN ARCHITECTS



Above: Solar panels can be a major component of reducing a home's energy bills and environmental footprint.

Right: This Houston home from Meritage Homes was designed to be water and energy efficient, while still providing a comfortable quality of life.

natural ventilation, or shaving some square footage from the floor plan of a new house. Building a home no bigger than what you need is the single most sustainable choice you can make, he says; smaller homes demand fewer resources both to build and to operate.

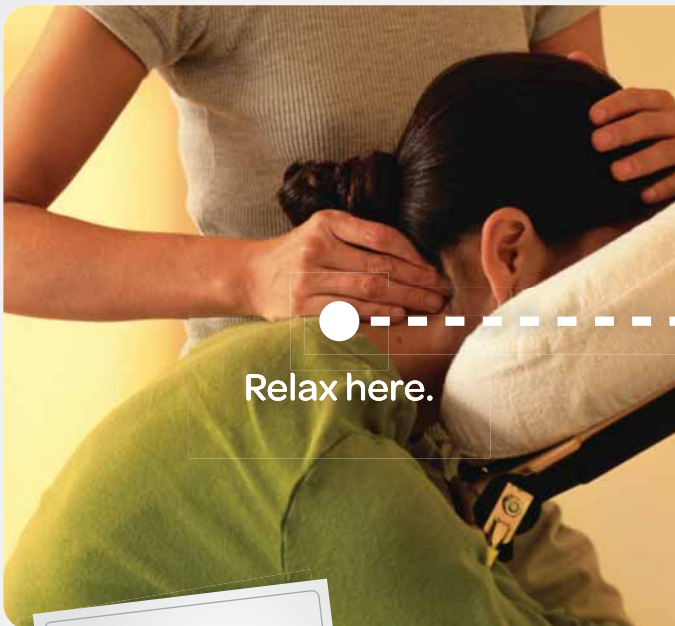
As green building continues its growth toward becoming the rule instead of the exception, upfront costs for more sophisticated technologies will come down, and eco-friendly materials will no longer fetch a premium. Until then, consumers can take heart in knowing that sustainable building materials, though often more expensive, pay for themselves over time.

Sonita Lontoh, a green-technology expert based in

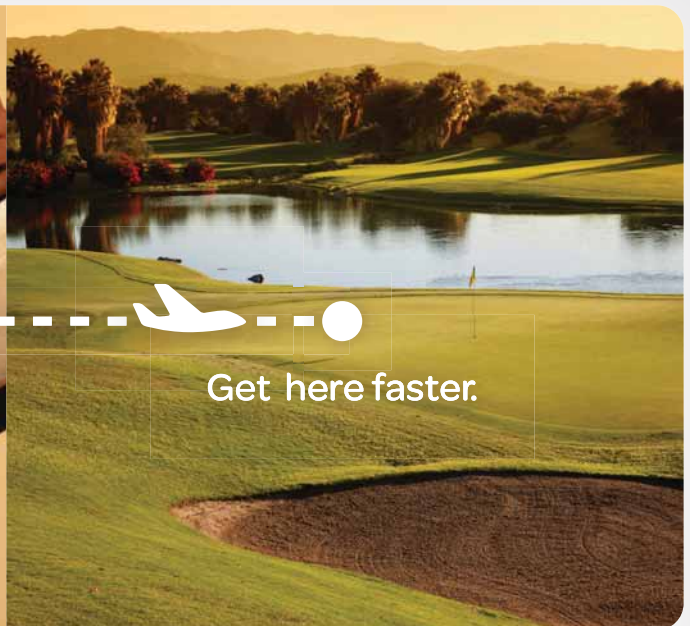
COURTESY: MERITAGE HOMES (2)



San Francisco, says the majority of people simply don't think too much about energy use. "It's not on their priority list until they see their bills are too high. Then they start caring," she says. Energy is where most of a homeowner's maintenance dollars are spent; investing in an efficient energy system and a tight building envelope that holds in heat and limits air loss is where the money can be saved. As



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the Wadhwas experienced with their solar-powered home, utilities in an energy-efficient home can be a fraction of those metered up in a conventional home. Lontoh says there's another financial reason homeowners should care: Incorporating sustainable elements and practices not only reduces operating costs but "has the potential to increase the value of the home," she says.

In 2008, the National Association of Realtors developed a Green Designation in which agents can opt for specialized

The design of this LEED Platinum-certified home in White Rock, British Columbia, from Method Homes, was inspired by the homes found in beach communities up and down the California coast.

training to help buyers and sellers understand the cost savings and health benefits associated with resource-efficient homes. Julie Jacobson, associate agent with the Los Angeles real estate brokerage firm Redfin, is accredited by the association



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as a LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) green real estate associate. She says the idea of sustainability in the marketplace is catching on, and she's happy to educate clients whenever possible. In an effort to improve the general green-home consciousness, she'll point out a home's green features and evaluate how much it costs to operate. Low-flow toilets and geothermal heat systems may not be as exciting conversation topics as granite countertops and home spas, but they're increasingly important to potential buyers.

Jacobson acknowledges that most buyers approach sustainability with "their wallet first," but if their investments and actions also happen to have positive environmental consequences, those buyers say so much the better. And the trifecta of cost savings, reduced environmental footprint and healthier living has value: A study by economists at the University of California, Berkeley and UCLA found that homes in the state with green labels such as Energy Star sell for 9 percent more than comparable non-labeled homes.

Jacobson says homeowners can find plenty of financial assistance programs to support their green goals. Some municipalities will swap old incandescent lightbulbs for more efficient compact fluorescent lightbulbs (CFLs) at no cost; many utilities offer energy audits; and "cash for grass" programs reward homeowners with rebates for ripping out thirsty lawns and planting water-smart landscaping instead.

"Almost every state in the country has financial incentive programs," Jacobson says. "It's a triple win—it's good for the environment, good for one's health and home, and it's good for the pocketbook."

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Modular Homes: How They Stack Up in Sustainability

A modular home is factory-built in sections and trucked to the site, where it's assembled on a foundation and finished. The factory construction process generates about 30 percent less waste than a comparable site-built home, according to the Manufactured Housing Institute; this reduced waste means less construction debris going into the nation's landfills. "The reduction of waste is a large component of sustainability," says Brian Abramson, co-founder of Method Homes in Seattle. "And there's less impact to the site."

Construction of modular homes also takes less time. Abramson says his custom homes can be ready for move-in in three to four months versus six to 12 months for a comparable "stick-built" counterpart. The building process is streamlined since many of the unknown variables are gone—which, from a green-home perspective, means there's less environmental disturbance.

Modular firms such as Method Homes are taking steps to create a greener footprint, too. They're reducing the use of chemicals and eliminating formaldehyde and volatile organic compounds (VOCs) in finishes, paints and adhesives in order to create healthier indoor air quality. "We pick products that are sustainable and renewable, whenever possible," Abramson says. And the company is incorporating green technology and practices to optimize the efficiency of heating and cooling systems.

Abramson says it's all part of an evolving process. "We're optimistic about the future of homebuilding in general," he says. "After the economic conditions of the past several years, we're really at a renaissance in terms of technology and design." —I.B.C.

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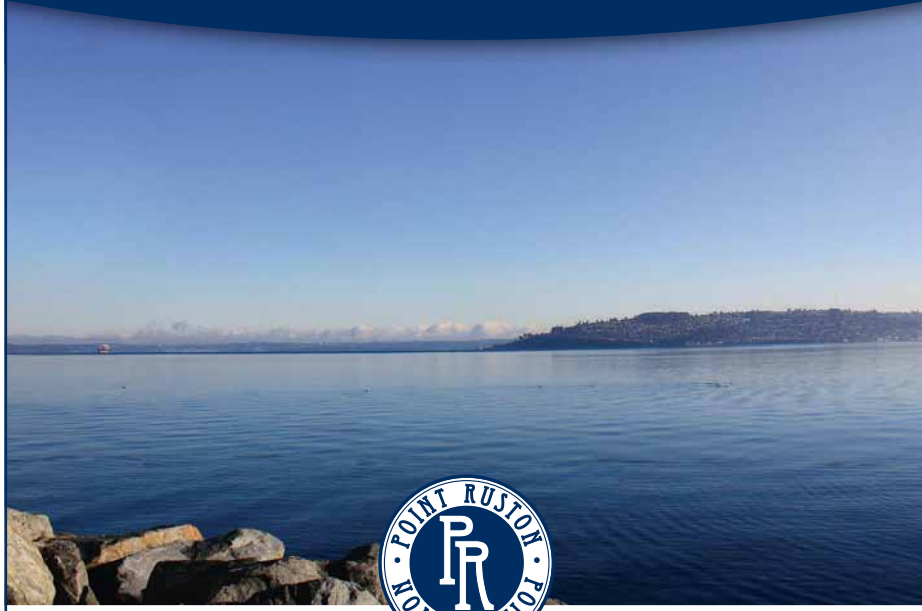
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Implementing Simple Steps

Some people believe conservation efforts are too complicated or require too much work. "It's actually not the case," says green-technology specialist Lontoh. "It can be as thorough as you want. And it's not that hard. You can do little things." Some tips for homeowners include:

- ▶ Log on to WattzOn.com, a free online tool that shows homeowners how to save money by tracking energy usage and making greener choices.
- ▶ Schedule a home energy audit, or checkup, which can reveal places where heat loss is happening.
- ▶ Set your thermostat to the lowest comfortable setting, and lower it even more when you're asleep or out of the house for longer than two hours. A programmable thermostat lets you set it and forget about it.
- ▶ Replace old appliances and furnaces with Energy Star-rated versions, and hot water heaters with high-efficiency or tankless models.
- ▶ Ensure windows and doors are properly sealed and that your home is well insulated. Some older homes have no insulation at all.
- ▶ Drafty windows are a significant cause of heat loss; replace single-paned windows with double- or triple-paned windows, which have a low-emittance (or "Low e") coating that reduces heat flow.
- ▶ Swap out incandescent bulbs with compact fluorescent lightbulbs; CFLs use up to 75 percent less energy.
- ▶ Identify and remove any hazardous materials, such as asbestos or particle boards with formaldehyde.

Industry insiders caution that "green" is a word that can be interpreted in many ways. And to that, Meritage Homes' C.R. Herro says: Buyer beware. "Homes, systems and appliances that are truly sustainable should be able to demonstrate their value to buyers," he says, noting that while many manufacturers and marketers are using the "eco" term, some are defining it rather loosely. "Some of it was great and substantive, and some of it wasn't.

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There are huge benefits, but consumers still need to ask questions to make sure they're getting good value."

Gardening with a Sustainable Thumb

Sustainable landscaping tries to strike a balance between a plan that is kind to the environment and one that is easy on the eyes. But that balance can be a delicate one, according to Brooks Kolb of Brooks Kolb Landscape Architecture in Seattle. "There's always a trade-off or conflict between the goal to be sustainable and the goal to meet your dream of what you want your landscape to be," Kolb says. "People rarely tell me, 'I want a green landscape.' Pragmatic constraints keep us from going too far in that direction if that is not their primary goal to begin with."

Kolb says most people want lawns, which require a lot of water; by definition, that makes it less sustainable. His design philosophy is to support what clients request, but to also nudge them in a greener direction that can help reduce watering and gardening bills, too. This may include using local materials whenever practical; reducing the size of lawns and leaving grass cuttings behind to serve as a natural fertilizer; installing a rain garden, which allows rainwater to collect and channel off into yards; and avoiding pesticides and herbicides to protect the groundwater from pollutants. University agricultural extension offices are good resources for guidance.

Interacting with Smart-Home Technology

Meritage Homes' C.R. Herro says now that the building industry has learned how to construct a green home and is communicating the message that a green home is no longer about sacrifice, consumers must be encouraged to interact with their homes in a new way through "smart" home-automation technology. "That's the last piece," Herro says.

Early adopters of technology who are committed to living a green lifestyle already have it figured out. A smart home

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"Before the turn of the last century, we used to measure energy by the number of logs we burned," says architect Matthew Coates. "Boy, that was a cold winter—I burned 10 cords of wood.' Now it's just a switch on the wall; we've completely lost that connection to our energy source." When homeowners are aware of their day-to-day use of resources, it allows them to make more fully informed choices.

After years of development, smart-home technology is coming into its own. Prices have come down to affordable levels, and now that homeowners are familiar and comfortable with using smartphones and tablets, they're finding automation systems simpler to use and more intuitive, too. Smart technology is increasingly common in new construction, and as the demand grows, more companies are getting into the business of retrofitting existing homes with the technology.

Vivek Wadhwa has been living and interacting with smart-home technology for nearly two years and says he's a believer. "There's no going back to old-fashioned air-conditioning and heating systems—this is the future," Wadhwa says, voicing his hope that more homes like his will be built in coming years. "People would live more comfortable lives, and we would dramatically cut the nation's energy bills—dramatically!" ▲

Ilyna Bort Caruso is a writer in New York.