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Holy smokes! Wasn't 1970 a few months ago? Did we save our air? Save the planet? Save our politics? Stop world hunger? Give peace a chance?

While there is little to congratulate ourselves for in the management of the planet in the last thirty years, there is one attempt to improve the quality of our lives that is worth mentioning.

That's the rapid growth of what is called building 'Green'.

If you haven't noticed, Green building has become a national, mainstream movement. As the Wall Street Journal recently put it: This is not just a sociological phenomenon for old hippies; it's a business trend.

Business trend, indeed. Corporate giants like Wal-Mart, Lockheed, and Veriphone have jumped on board. Why? Simple. Green building brings more profits, heralded by books like 'The Greening of the Bottom Line'.

Even Washington has gotten into the act with the 'Greening of the White House' program, which, since 1993, has been renovating our beloved national home with Green principles in mind.

But how is Green building done? Isn't the act of construction itself a wasteful and consumptive act? Doesn't it gobble up open land, exhaust natural resources for short term gain, and spill waste right to the urban edge of what writer Wallace Stegner calls the 'geography of hope'?

Green building strives to benefit people and the environment by rethinking how structures are designed, constructed, landscaped, operated and used. It examines the life cycles of the elements involved in the building process, and in the final impact of the building effort.

One way building Green improves the personal environment is to let more daylight and natural ventilation into old and new buildings. Studies reported in Environmental Building News have shown that when daylight and natural ventilation are used in a building buying in some retail stores increases up to 40% on average. When these same concepts are used in manufacturing plants and office buildings, the number of days employees are absent from work declines up to 15 to 47% in numerous cases.

Even schools are affected. PG&E's 1999 'Daylighting in Schools' study has shown that students have significantly faster learning rates and better test scores in day-lit and well ventilated spaces than in those rooms without.

According to Bill Browning of Green Development Services, Snowmass, Colorado, residential developments around the country that have thoroughly used Green design and construction principles, like Village Homes in Sacramento, have sold quicker and brought in more dollars than those communities that don't. And guess what? They are nice places to live!

In the past decade, several groups of environmentally minded building professionals in Santa Barbara have banded together to promote Green building.

Among their actions have been:

- The Natural Building Network lecture series exploring methods and materials.
- The Innovative Building Review Committee (IBRC) advisory committee to the county's Planning and Development Department, which hustles Green projects through the permit process.
- The Sustainability Project, which produced, among other events, a major educational building conference, 'Green Building Now', in June of 1996.
- The Santa Barbara Contractor's Association current Green subcommittee to tap the green market.
- The Green Building Alliance (GBA), a group of Green building professionals promoting a team design-and-build approach.

Green building materials that these local builders have discovered include the use of recycled content materials like cellulose insulation or drywall made of used newsprint. Just think, the newspaper that you hold in your hand could end up in a wall.

Installing cellulose is a no-itch joy for construction workers and performs better than fiberglass, according to Fine Homebuilding Magazine, in their May, 2000 issue. Cellulose typically adds 1% to the cost of a new home, but that cost is repaid many times over in the life of the home because it takes less energy to heat and cool every year.

Wood framing members called 'structural engineered wood' such as 'I' beam floor joists make the most of younger trees, sparing old growth forests. Still, timber-harvesting practices from 'working' forests remains a hot issue.

Doug Tompkins of the El Bosque Pumalin Foundation, San Francisco, believes that current multinational lumber corporations' forestry practices are the equivalent to war on the planet. His group works with countries like Argentina and Chile to change the way forests are harvested.

In the U.S., a private organization, the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), certifies that companies that harvest trees must meet certain guidelines to reconcile intensive rotational harvesting with biodiversity protection, including protection of stream side zones. Western states lumber producers such as Big Creek, Collins Pine, and Harwood all embrace environmentally friendly harvesting practices selling certified wood products under the FSC's watchful eye.

How buildings use energy once they are built has a major impact on the pocketbook and the environment as well. Surprisingly, one of the simplest Green acts a consumer can make is without even lifting a hammer.

In California, new renewable power providers like Enron Energy Services (www.enron.com) or Green Mountain (www.choosewisely.com) can supply a home or business with 100% non-fossil fuel energy for the same cost or less of what you pay now. If we are concerned about how we pollute the atmosphere, how can we possibly turn down such a simple, yet revolutionary offer? As we've learned from the household recycling efforts, a few things accomplished by a lot of people can make a big difference. The building industry is no different.

Thirty years after the hope expressed on that first Earth Day of doing something good for the planet and good for ourselves, it's no longer just a dream. Building Green is not only a business trend, but one way we can show our appreciation and respect for the gift we have in this good, green earth.

I encourage you to express your thanks through your actions.

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