

February 16, 2001

Are Green Building Techniques Sustainable?

It's been said that fads and fashions are cyclical. Those bell-bottoms that ex-hippies threw out in the 70s now would be coveted by their children, just as popular hair styles have continually shifted from low-maintenance to teased-and-sprayed and back again.

The United States seems to be quietly moving closer to a new kind of energy crisis reminiscent of the 1970s. That fact, combined with the slowly building hysteria over so-called urban sprawl, is creating renewed pressure for sustainable architecture techniques in the marketplace.

Only the most callous developers would argue that sustainable architecture techniques are a bad thing. But many seem to believe that green building techniques are simply a fad, something that will go away if they ignore it long enough.

While smart real estate pros would not claim to have a grasp on what the future will bring, their trepidation perhaps is less from fear that green building is a fad and more from indications that it is expensive. And of course, fear of the unknown plays a part. It's not easy being green, especially for real estate developers.

So what exactly are "green building" and "sustainable architecture?" Are these passing fads or here to stay?

Just as vegetarianism ranges from folks who still eat fish to vegans who refuse even butter and cheese, green building can cover a wide span of beliefs and techniques. In any case, the primary goals include efficient use of land and energy, water conservation, improved indoor air quality, and resource conservation, primarily by using recycled materials.

Up to this point, most green building projects have been undertaken by government agencies, which tend to not protect their budget dollars as carefully as other entities. In the commercial and residential building arena, most builders and developers focus their green building efforts solely on landscaping.

Some developers, architects and suppliers are seeking to fill the growing demand for environmentally-friendly building practices. In addition, they hope to influence other developers to preclude government-forced green building, preferring private-market solutions instead.

For example, the [U.S. Green Building Council](#) has put together a coalition which includes HVAC manufacturers, developers and architects. One of the most promising vehicles they promote for green building is an IT-based solutions called [BEES](#), which stands for Building for Environmental and Economic Sustainability.

BEES was developed by the [National Institute of Standards and Technology](#). It's based on consensus standards and designed to be practical, flexible, consistent and transparent. BEES is a piece of decision-support software aimed at designers, builders and product manufacturers. It includes actual

environmental and economic performance data for a number of building products.

Rather than simply concluding that a product is better because it is "green," the software weighs factors like life cycle, maintenance and repair costs, etc. This makes the evaluation of costs and benefits associated with environmentally friendly products easier for building professionals.

Like any new technique, green building has its detractors and its horror stories. About five years ago, the University of Texas Health Science Center announced upcoming construction of a new nursing and biomedical sciences center in Houston. It was to be a green building showcase for "stewarding resources, doing no harm, benefiting others in the present and future, and respecting the environment."

Now the \$40-million building is projected to cost \$60 million.

Unfortunately, ground-breaking techniques do require extensive research and development costs. Who is to foot the bill for such expensive R&D?

Right now, the answer is the taxpayers, such as with California's new high-tech, extremely green Environmental Protection Agency building. Will private industry follow suit with long-term investments focused on sustainable buildings? Only time will tell.

Written by Lesley Hensell

Copyright © 2001 [Realty Times](#). All Rights Reserved.