

Green Building: Where do we start?

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Residential green building has moved into the mainstream. Home buyers are actively seeking the peace of mind and long term benefits of high performance homes that are durable, energy efficient and have a healthy indoor environment.

With the myriad of building products and technical information available to home buyers, where do you start when evaluating the merits of green building while planning your custom home project?

Assemble a team of committed professionals and organize your thoughts around the fundamental aspects of a green built home:

Site Management:

Don't ignore free energy! Orient your building properly to take advantage of the prevailing breeze and sunlight. Work with your builder to protect trees and landscaping during construction. Implement erosion control practices and properly manage your construction waste. Be a smart site planner and you're off on the right foot.

Material Selection:

Focus on materials, both interior and exterior, that are durable, natural, and designed to function in our harsh climate. Integrate locally available materials into your design. Ask if your lumber, hardwood floors or decking material were sustainably harvested, many come with third party certification. Ask about recycle content – the amount of post industrial or post consumer waste used to manufacture your building products.

Energy Efficiency:

Before finalizing your design, ask your builder to obtain an energy rating – a third party analysis of your home's projected energy efficiency. Use that data to make informed decisions regarding insulation systems, window selection, framing techniques and HVAC sizing before starting construction.

Water Conservation:

Tankless water heaters are more efficient than standard water heaters. They take less time to deliver hot water to each user and only run 'on demand'. Dual flush toilets are now commonly available in the United States. Design your landscape with native trees and plants. They are beautiful, hardy and know how to survive our Houston summers without establishing a long term relationship with your garden hose.

Health and Indoor Air Quality:

Manage the air quality in your home like your health depends on it...it just might. Assure your HVAC system provides each part of your home with sufficient quantities of conditioned fresh air. Ask about whole house filtration. Incorporate prefinished materials, low VOC paints and low VOC adhesives in your design and product selection to minimize indoor pollutants and maximize the quality of your indoor environment.

The Greater Houston Builder's Association recently rolled out a residential green building program titled the Green Building Initiative. The program is designed to bring more energy-efficient and environmentally-friendly homes to the Houston area by providing a baseline for practical green building approaches. A summary of the program, participating builders and a checklist organized around the fundamentals of green building are available at www.ghba.org.

Jeff Sipes is a partner at W.E. Gilbert Co., a local custom builder that is particularly focused on green building in residential construction. W.E. Gilbert Co. is a builder participant in the Green Building Initiative. For more information, or to see one of our custom homes currently under construction, please visit our website at www.wegilbert.com.