

The Green Bandwagon

by Eric Lewis

Green is in. Be Green or be square. Suddenly going Green has become not only popular, but profitable, and everyone wants to get on the Bandwagon. While there are obvious benefits to the mass culture climbing on board, there is also the danger of the message being lost in the rush. As merchants and service providers scramble to “greenwash” their product lines, the consumer may be left in the dust wondering what is really a benefit to the environment and what is just hype.

Fortunately, there is some help out there. The U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC) is a 501c3 non-profit organization that certifies houses, commercial buildings, and even entire neighborhoods as being truly “green,” through its LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) program. Now if you buy a home that is LEED Certified, you can rest assured that you are not being led astray. The National Association of Home Builder’s Green Builder Program is promoting a similar idea, but their definitions are considered less strict than LEED.

Coupled with LEED certification is the Energy Star program, a joint venture of the U.S. Department of Energy and the Environmental Protection Agency. This program “promotes the manufacture and use of energy efficient products to protect the environment and conserve resources. The Energy STAR program rewards manufacturers and consumers by offering incentives to participate.” Many LEED certified buildings feature Energy Star appliances and building materials.

There is no such thing as a totally Green house, one that is built entirely with renewable materials, runs on renewable energy, and would completely break down into harmless compost, unless you live in a teepee, a grass hut, or a cave. We may yet return to those days, but for now we try to use products that cause the least harm to the environment.

When making any kind of purchasing decision, one must always keep in mind the three basic tenants of sustainability: Reduce, Recycle, and Reuse. Building a 1200–square–foot house out of ordinary materials will use far less resources than building a totally Green 3000–square–foot house. Replacing your old windows beats building a new, snug Green addition to your home because the old parts are drafty. And buying your new door at the Habitat for Humanity materials store will eliminate the need to use precious energy and resources in the manufacture of new goods.

If you want to probe deeper into the meaning of “green” as it relates to products, you need to go to the next level, which is “embodied energy.” Wikipedia defines this as “the sum total of the energy necessary—from the raw material extraction, to transport, manufacturing, assembly, installation as well as the capital and other costs of a specific material—to produce a service or product and finally its disassembly, deconstruction and/or decomposition.” Concrete, for example, has a high embodied energy content because of the difficulty and toxicity in the mining of Portland cement, the high transportation costs due to its weight, and complications of disposal due to its chemical bonding. It takes 4.7 million BTUs or 45 gallons of oil to produce one ton of cement.

Another way to evaluate embodied energy is to look at whole systems, such as an old house: how much energy went into that building and how much would be wasted if it were torn down? Or how about the property you are about to clear of trees for your house or your road. How much is that forest worth to the watershed and its inhabitants? There is a tremendous and ever-expanding body of knowledge on embodied energy and its environmental implications, including tables that compare various materials, available on the World Wide Web.

All this talk about Green can get pretty complicated, but it really all boils down to one thing: pay attention to what you buy. Think about your needs versus your wants. Think about the fragile planet we have and about all its inhabitants, however small. Living in harmony with the Earth is the goal and mindfulness is the first step.

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