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Embracing Sustainability

Incorporate simple green principles into your designs.

By Sylvie Meehan
(From the NKBA's *Profiles Magazine*)

When the concept of green design first came out, I wasn't too interested in it. I had quite a few misconceptions about sustainability because I thought it meant using old, recycled products and spending extra money to convert regular houses into green houses.



Then I decided to start studying the topic to learn what the concept was all about. What I found was fascinating—not only could I offer beautiful green design, but it didn't necessarily cost more, and could even save my clients money! I figured I wasn't the only one with those misconceptions, so I'd like to share what I've discovered.

In this economy, if you want to save money and be good to the planet, then green design is a great solution. You don't need to go overboard with it, just do it one step at a time and teach your kids to do the same—little steps can make a big difference. What we don't know scares us more than it should. Inform yourself and embrace green design.

If you're apprehensive about embracing sustainability in your designs, you're not alone. Maybe you don't know where to start, and are so tired from your normal routine that you wonder how you're going to find the time to learn something you're not even sure you need to learn. Let me assure you, to stay ahead of your competitors, you need to learn about sustainable design because it's not just a passing fad. Just jump in with both feet and you'll learn how to apply this concept—it's not as hard as it may seem.

Most people don't like change—they spend all their energy resisting change only to end up doing it anyway. It's not about whether you can afford to do it—you can't afford not to do it! One thing is for sure: you can't continue doing things the way you've always done them. Be ready before your customers ask for green design. It's important that you educate yourself on sustainable design soon, so you have that edge now that the economy is showing signs of improvement.

According to Design Success University co-founder Gail Doby (who, coincidentally, authored "Green Design Summit" in this issue of Profiles), "Let's not forget about the tax credits that could help offset the costs of remodeling; if you know how the tax credits work and you can share that with your clients, they'll see how your expertise and services can save them money. You'll no longer be thought of as a luxury if you're having this conversation with them." With that in mind, let me introduce you to a few steps to help you start going green.

What is Green?

Sustainable design is the philosophy of designing spaces with a minimal impact on the environment, such as using renewable resources wherever possible. To perform sustainable design, you should first practice it in your own home. After all, you can more easily explain a new concept to your clients if you've experienced it firsthand.

Before you design a kitchen or bathroom, understand what it means to reduce, reuse, and recycle. Reduce waste—the need to recycle—by not creating it in the first place. To do this, reduce your consumption habits. Still, there are times when you'll have leftover materials. When that happens, reuse them whenever possible before recycling or discarding them. For instance, repurpose old furniture, such as turning an old chest into a bath vanity. For materials that can't be reused, be sure to recycle them, which allows them to be transformed into new usable materials. With a few simple steps, water and energy conservation can be adapted and easily incorporated into design and daily living.

Water Conservation

Specify low-flow faucets, which have aerators to cut the amount of water used. By injecting air into the water stream, these faucets use as much as 40 percent less water than conventional faucets, while offering the same force out of the tap. Like faucets, low-flow aerated shower heads reduce water consumption.

Low-flow toilets represent another area where you can design a more water-efficient bathroom, allowing homeowners to typically save between \$50 and \$100 per year on water and wastewater bills. Older toilets typically use up to seven gallons per flush (gpf). They evolved into more

efficient 3.5-gfp models, and then further developed into 1.6-gpf units. The new low-flow or high-efficiency toilets only use about 1.28 gallons per flush.

For a family of four, each of whom flushes the home toilet twice per day, a 1.28-gfp unit results in a savings of more than 45 gallons of water every day versus a 3.5-gpf toilet and more than 90 gallons per day versus a 7-gfp model. Over the course of a year, that 1.28-gfp toilet will save more than 8,000 gallons of water compared to a 3.5-gpf model and more than 16,000 gallons compared to a 7-gfp toilet. Many dual-flush toilets use well under 1 gallon per flush, yielding further water savings.

You can conserve water in your kitchen designs as well. Energy Star-qualified dishwashers save a significant amount of water per year for the typical household; usually averaging 800 gallons.

Energy Conservation

Note that water-efficient devices often save electricity as well. Aerated faucets and showerheads reduce the burden on a home's water heater by using less water. Because of the demand for heated water, dishwashers account for about two percent of a home's energy costs. Energy Star-qualified dishwashers use 25 percent less energy than the federal minimum standard.

Short of asking a client to take ice-cold showers every day, you'll never completely eliminate the need for heated water in a home, but you can specify a high-efficiency water heater, such as a solar model. If your clients aren't interested in upgrading an old, inefficient water heater, you can at least recommend an insulating blanket to help the old unit retain more of the heat it generates.

Before you can begin addressing energy savings in a client's home, you should recommend an energy audit to learn where they're wasting money in energy consumption. Most utility companies can perform this evaluation.

One of the most cost-effective ways to save money and help the environment is to recommend programmable thermostats for the homes you remodel. Heating and cooling generally accounts for 35 to 45 percent of a home's energy cost, and programmable thermostats can allow your clients to save 20 percent on their energy costs. This is done in winter by reducing the temperature five degrees at night when everyone is asleep and 10 degrees during the day when the home's occupants are out at work or school, and by raising it by equal amounts when cooling in the summer. Be sure to recommend an Energy Star-qualified programmable thermostat to your clients.

When replacing or adding windows in a project, choose Energy Star-qualified windows with a U-factor of 0.35 or less. The lower the U-factor, the better. In addition, low-emissive (Low-E) windows can reduce a home's energy bill up to 15 percent by lowering the way the windows transfer heat, and reduces fading by up to 75 percent.

Many new light fixtures are designed exclusively for compact fluorescent (CFL) bulbs that save money, and installing a ceiling fan in the kitchen will assist the air conditioning in the room by providing a cool breeze. In the winter, these fans help the heater by pushing warm air down from the ceiling to reduce the need for raising or lowering the thermostat. Multi-speed and reversible motor ceiling fans can cut electrical bills by 25 to 40 percent in summer and up to 10 percent on heating bills in the winter, according to the Green and Save Eco Academy (www.greenandsave.com).



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