

# Seeing green

LIVING ECO-FRIENDLY WITHOUT SACRIFICING LUXURY  
BY ROBERT LOCKARD

With energy costs reaching all-time highs in many parts of the world, it's no wonder discerning homebuyers are seeking creative solutions to the challenge of maintaining luxury homes and high standards of living. Ironically, one of the best ways to preserve a luxury lifestyle is to cut back on energy use. It seems like a contradiction – reducing the



amount of resources used while preserving or even increasing the level of prestige – but that's exactly what is being done in many new "green" homes. Curbing energy use doesn't have to limit the luxuries of high-end living. When it comes down to it, not all homebuyers are interested in giving up their personal comfort or paying more for a luxury home that they see as benefiting the environment, but not themselves. There must be a more personal incentive to convince these people to pay the initially higher costs, and many "green" homes deliver exactly what buyers are seeking, such as dramatically reduced energy bills, healthier living conditions and, of course, top-notch luxury.

**A** basic question that should be answered at the start is what qualifies a home as “green”? Hannah Tai, a certified EcoBroker with Pacific Union GMAC Real Estate in Mill Valley, Calif., points out that this question is harder to answer than it might seem. “Because the concept of building or remodeling homes in a more environmentally friendly way is a fairly new concept in modern society, the qualification of a home as ‘green’ is something that is still evolving and taking shape.” A big reason why “green” is hard to define is because it often means something different depending on an area’s location and climate. For example, in a dry, sunny environment, solar panels and rainwater containment systems might be the biggest hallmarks of “green” buildings. But in a colder, rainy environment, humidity control and radiant heating systems would be much more desirable features. There is such a diversity of opinion on what makes a home “green” that some suggest the term itself has little value. Jonathan Marks, a

the LEED™ (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) standards are becoming quite well-known,” says Cotten Alston, an EcoBroker with Harry Norman, Realtors in Atlanta, Ga. “Primarily, these seem to be noted in commercial buildings, but there is also a residential certification program supervised by the U.S. Green Building Council.” In addition to the standards set by LEED for Homes™, you can also use Built Green™, Energy Star™ or similar groups to gauge your energy needs and potential savings. Have your laptop handy? Go to [www.LuxuryRealEstate.com/green](http://www.LuxuryRealEstate.com/green) to find a number of links and resources on “green” living.

Many “green” features come at a significant price. A fully energy-optimized home can have an initial cost as much as 20 percent greater than a regular home. So what are the incentives of putting forth the effort of modifying your older home or adding to the total cost of building a new home? “There is a huge push to save money on energy bills and to provide a healthy living environment for your family,” says Carson Matthews, an EcoBroker with Harry Norman, Realtors in the Buckhead area of Atlanta. “These are two of the highlights of

financial benefits, while short-term buyers would enjoy a healthier indoor environment, but would not recoup their costs as easily.

If you decide that a “green” home best meets your needs, there are a number of experts you can talk to and products you can use to help you spend your money most effectively. “The first thing I would recommend is to get an energy audit,” Roseann Blacher says. “This will tell a homeowner where their energy dollars are going and will help them put their dollars to work in a more energy-efficient way. Stressing energy efficiency and dollars saved will help bring a broader range of participants into the ‘green’ fold than merely those that are focused on more environmental concerns. I have actually experienced reluctance, for whatever reason, regarding alternative energy. So whatever I can do to educate more people regarding energy efficiency, I am delighted to do so.” To ensure the best results, you should talk to the experts. The U.S. Department of Energy suggests calling your state or local government’s energy office for suggestions of local organizations that can perform energy audits or offer advice on how to conduct one yourself. If you

more eco-friendly materials and remodeling with an eye toward deconstruction instead of demolition.” Reduce, reuse, recycle. As the “ultimate recycled product,” a home is an excellent place to reduce energy use while modifying and reusing the existing structure in an improved manner.

Experts see a number of positive trends in the “green” home market on both the macro and micro level. “There is a definite trend towards smaller, more efficient homes,” Hannah Tai says. “In addition, there is a huge demand and movement to build homes more centrally located within a city. In bucking a decades-old trend of movement further and away from cities, there is clearly a renewal of interest in developing communities with the goal in mind of less commuting, as well as an urban plan where people can walk to and enjoy amenities in their immediate neighborhoods.” On the micro level, Roseann Blacher notes that the main source of “green” homes’ popularity is their energy efficiency, plus their use of low-VOC (Volatile Organic Compound) paints, along with non-toxic materials in the carpet, upholstery and flooring, providing a healthier environment for families. “The more options people hear

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ALTOR® and EcoBroker with Pacific Union GMAC Real Estate in Rafael, Calif., notes, “In my opinion, ‘green’ has become a trite and abused term.” He warns that the word “green” can be abused to apply to homes in which minimal efforts have been undertaken to actually improve their energy efficiency and conservation. It is difficult to discuss something as ill-defined as “green” homes. Luckily, Roseann Blacher, EcoBroker with Harry Norman, Realtors in Marietta, Ga., offers this succinct definition: “A ‘green’ home is one which uses all of its resources in the most efficient and healthiest way possible.” Of course, every “green” home meets these criteria, so Blacher adds, “there are different levels of ‘green,’ as there are different ages of homes and demographic demographics.” For instance, many homes built before the 1930s do not contain adequate insulation, causing air conditioners and heaters to work harder to maintain a comfortable indoor temperature. Newer homes are better-designed to retain hot or cold air. A good way to judge the energy efficiency of your home is to compare it to the standards formulated by groups devoted to “green” building. “Nationally,

a ‘green’ home. People may not consider themselves ‘green,’ but they most certainly want to save money on bills and live in a home that will contribute to the healthy lifestyle they are living.” Jonathan Marks, an adamant “green” supporter and participant in many “green”-focused forums, agrees. He notes that solely labeling energy-efficient homes as “green” might not be the best strategy to attract buyers, since some people are more interested in personal comfort, safety and expense than the environment. “If I told you that a home has lower energy bills, is healthier for you and your family and it’s a great investment, then of course you’d instantly recognize the benefits of buying that home,” he says. Marks is an expert on all of the benefits of “green” homes, but he still encourages brokers to focus on the benefits that are most important to their homebuyers. While energy-efficient homes initially carry a much higher cost than regular homes, they cost significantly less to maintain, eventually saving money and earning a higher return on investment. The key is how much time homeowners plan to live in their “green” home. Long-term owners would be more likely to enjoy both personal and

live in an older home, an audit will almost certainly help you save a significant amount of money. It is usually best to avoid quick fixes and, instead, focus on products that provide substantial health and financial benefits. “There are so many innovative materials coming on the market every day that are better for the health of your family,” Carson Matthews says. “I encourage my clients to use these products whenever possible.” He lists a number of “green” products that can be found in the Web sites listed on [www.LuxuryRealEstate.com/green](http://www.LuxuryRealEstate.com/green). “You want a tight house where you can control the air exchange with properly sized HVAC (Heating, Ventilating and Air Conditioning) and avoid air loss through cracks and lack of proper insulation,” Matthews advises. All of these features are designed to make a home better to live in and to make it more attractive to potential buyers when the time comes to sell it. “A home is the ultimate recycled product,” Jonathan Marks says. “People completely reuse and reinvent the same homes for generations. It only makes sense to move toward a thought process that is sustainable. There are myriad aspects that go into play with ‘green’ building, such as using

#### GREAT “GREEN” PRODUCTS

- Icynene foam insulation
- Solar panels for electricity and water heaters
- Solar exterior ambient lighting
- Geothermal high-efficiency HVAC
- Low-VOC paints
- Low-E (Emissivity) windows
- Energy Star™ appliances
- Sustainable or “repurposed” materials, such as bamboo flooring and composite countertops made of concrete, paper or glass
- Built-in rainwater containment systems
- Rain gardens, which utilize rain runoff
- Native landscaping and sustainable mulching materials
- Eco-friendly wallpapers
- “Green” roofs



about, the more they want to include in their homes,” she says. Both the quantity and quality of “green” products is increasing in the current marketplace, thanks to rising levels of competition and demand. “The wide array of materials available now to people committed to ‘greening’ their homes is astounding,” Hannah Tai says. “From recycled jeans used as insulation, to thinner, more efficient photovoltaics (solar cells), to the wealth of low-VOC paints in the mainstream now, the industry has grown by leaps and bounds not only as far as variety, but the quality of ‘green’ products available to the consumer.”

With so many high-quality “green” products available at increasingly affordable prices, luxury “green” homes are becoming much more cost-efficient. Their true value is in their long-term savings through lower energy and maintenance costs, along with their health benefits. Going “green” doesn’t have to mean sacrificing luxury. Indeed, a luxury lifestyle might be better-maintained in an energy-efficient home as energy costs increase. Keep thinking creatively and you might just start seeing “green.” ♻️