Building green homes requires top design and building talent

BY ANGIE FRANCALANCIA

PHOTOS BY MARK FREERKS

At left are Kyle Abney, of Abney + Abney Green Solutions, with Roger Zahn and Andrew Zahn of Zahn Development at the Glass House in Lighthouse Point, built by Zahn Development. Above is Minto Marketing VP Glen Trotta at Olympia in Wellington.

From the exterior, green homes don't look much different than their resource-wasting counterparts. A green home is not just energy-efficient appliances, solar panels or low-flow toilets.

To really build green, architects, engineers and general contractors have to change their entire construction models, building plans and the way they handle the dumpster.

That major shift in the business model is why the residential building industry has slowly embraced green building.

"Residential green building is really being brought on by an ethical belief, a passion from people who really believe in caring for the environment and being energy efficient," said John Banting of Hedrick Brothers Construction.

Hedrick Brothers, like many of the residential construction companies embracing green building, is a custom builder serving clients who are often more educated and passionate, and who have more dollars to invest.

"Some will say, 'I just want to be extremely energy efficient.' Others will have a strong drive to conserve water. Part of the job is to help consumers understand how all aspects of green building work together," said Banting, who serves as the education chair of the U.S. Green Building Council's Palm Beach chapter.

Custom-built green homes can apply all the fundamentals of green building – even orienting the home on the property for the most advantageous sun exposure, reusing materials on-site and incorporating salvaged materials. Meeting all the fundamentals of green building becomes more complex for production builders. But green homes – although limited in supply – can be found in every market price point, including in low- and very-low-income housing.

With numerous certification programs, including the U.S. Green Building Council's Leadership in Engineering and Environmental Design (LEED), the Florida Green Building Coalition and Energy Star, there are plenty of guidelines for builders to earn the green stamp of approval. But with a requirement that each house be certified, few production builders have taken that final step.

SEEKING CERTIFICATIONS

Minto Builders will be seeking certifications from five green programs, including LEED, at its Cooper City community Cascada. But the homebuilder also has rolled out new homes in two Palm Beach County communities - Olympia in Wellington and Porto Sol in Royal Palm Beach – with numerous green features.

"We now have gone to all energy-saving fluorescent lights throughout the homes," Minto Marketing VP Glen Trotta said. "We're also using low-VOC [volatile organic chemicals] paint and low-VOC carpet and pads. All the appliances are Energy Star-rated. We're also using special air filters, and we've designed exterior vented microwaves."

Minto's homes earning the Energy Star rating are between 20 and 30 percent more efficient than others, the company says. Many have also been designed with large overhangs that allow light, but block heat.

"We like to say the home takes care of you," Trotta said.

Miami-based Carlisle Development Group, the largest developer of affordable housing in Florida, has taken advantage of federal tax dollars, coupled with a strategy to hold its projects for at least 50 years, to bring green standards to the residents who could most benefit.

"Our standard specifications, whether or not we're pursuing the certification, is efficient water fixtures, efficient lighting, low-VOC paints and high-quality air filters on the air conditioners. Those are the basics," COO Kenneth Naylor said. Finding ways to address the other fundamentals of green construction, such as reusing materials, proves more complex.

"One of the initial things about the LEED process is it forces you to think through the design to achieve operational cost savings," Naylor said. "One great example is at Tallman Pines in Deerfield Beach. We were looking for ways to add recycled materials. We realized we were knocking down some old housing and we could recycle the crushed concrete and use it as a base for our parking lot."

Carlisle has been able to bring green concepts to several infill communities, including Northwest Gardens, an entire neighborhood going up in Fort Lauderdale that allows the developer to incorporate LEED Neighborhood Design standards for factors such as parks, green space and walkability.

MARK FREERKS

Kenneth Naylor of Carlisle Development Group shows off a low-flow faucet, which is just one of the many green innovations used in its projects.

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