

THE COMMERCIAL APPEAL

ECO-FRIENDLY DESIGN GOES MAINSTREAM

Green is the new black.

This phrase has been so overused in recent months, it's already cliché. But going green is about more than latching on to the latest trend.

When it comes to home design, green is slowly becoming the new norm.

"I think it's going to become the standard and not the exception," said Bob Land, an architect with Askew Nixon Ferguson Architects and chairman of the Memphis regional chapter of the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC). "And a lot of this stuff is about to start taking off here in Memphis, finally."

Registered interior designer Shandra Blackwell, president and principal designer at Memphis-based Shea-Noel Interiors, has been putting green design principles into practice for about four years -- ever since her firm installed its first bamboo floor. She has paid attention as eco-friendly products have come onto the design market, something that has been happening with increasing frequency as the eco-friendly fad catches hold with consumers.

"It took several years for the residential industry to catch up," Blackwell said. "But in 2006, we were able to claim we were going green as a firm. Now, there are about 100 vendors the firm works with who are green."

For her firm's largely high-end residential projects, Blackwell specifies eco-friendly products at every possible opportunity, using furniture with frames made only from Forest Stewardship Council-certified hardwoods, fabrics made with natural dyes, and when possible, indigenous materials, such as Arkansas fieldstone and Kentucky bluestone.

"We try to find materials within a 500-mile radius as much as possible," she said, noting that in the furniture market, buying American-made products has become increasingly difficult as many manufacturers have moved their operations overseas.

"There are not a lot of furniture manufacturers left in America," she said. "But I use them whenever I can. It takes less energy to get those products here."

Blackwell, whose firm recently expanded into Nashville, began to go green before green was mainstream, because "we saw the writing on that wall," she said. Some clients don't even realize the products going into their homes are better for the environment -- and their health.

"When I was a kid, I had one friend who had asthma," Land said. "You certainly hear stories about increased cases of asthma and allergies these days. I personally think it's related

to the air quality in our houses. The chemicals we use and the off-gassing of products we buy and the paints we use."

Askew Nixon Ferguson has worked on projects locally that feature green design elements, including St. George's Independent School in Collierville. The school was situated to maximize natural light usage and incorporates green products and materials, including carpets and carpet tiles with recycled content, low-VOC paints, fluorescent lighting and windows with energy efficient low-E glass. In addition, trees cut down on the site during construction were used to make furniture for the school's library and student lounge.

A green model doctor's office created by the firm for Healthcare Realty Trust in East Memphis features sensors that turn lighting off when rooms are not occupied, carpet tiles with recycled content, VOC-free paints, compact fluorescent lighting and a reception desk countertop made from recycled copper.

Along with choosing VOC-free paints and buying furniture constructed from FSC-certified hardwoods, there are a number of steps homeowners can take to reduce their households'

environmental footprints.

Land recommends replacing worn-out appliances with Energy Star-rated models, using materials and finishes for remodeling projects that are not only sustainable but durable, and taking steps to increase energy efficiency, such as planting trees to shade a home in the summer, increasing attic insulation, sealing leaky ductwork and installing windows with a low-emittance, or low-E, coating.

Blackwell said reusing or recycling items rather than discarding them is a great way to green up a remodeling project.

“You can be green just by watching what you put into landfills,” she said. “In a remodel we did, the homeowners didn’t want their tile floor anymore. When we pulled the tile up, it came right up with very little damage. We donated it to Habitat.”

But, as architect Jeff Blackledge of Midtown-based Blackledge Architecture pointed out, the best way to achieve a green building is to start from the ground up.

“One thing about designing with sustainability in mind, it’s not necessarily just the products you use,” Blackledge said. “It’s about pure design. It’s about how to position the building on a site to let in the most natural light and to control heat and air efficiency.

“It’s best to start in the beginning stages, not just to find ways to make the building materials green.”

Blackwell recently partnered with Blackledge and with Darin Halford of Darin K. Halford Builder to

launch a new venture, a construction management firm called B2H that centers on the idea of sustainable design. Using a collaborative approach that harmonizes the architecture, interior design and building stages of each project, the firm will work with commercial and high-end residential clients who share its vision of great design with an Earth-friendly focus.

“It’s becoming more and more obvious that we need to use green products,” Blackledge said. “We need to be building for the long term, using products that are going to last.”

One planned Memphis structure that exemplifies that philosophy is the Sustainable Design House, a project under way by the University of Memphis Center for Sustainable Design and several local partners. The house at the corner of North Main and Greenlaw in the Uptown neighborhood will meet the standards for green design set forth by the USGBC’s LEED for Homes program, the American Lung Association’s Health House program and Memphis Light, Gas and Water’s EcoBuild program. (The LEED program, Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, is a green building rating system.)

The project’s groundbreaking is imminent, said Eric Criswell, a professional engineer and president of DPC Construction, which is building the home. According to Criswell, the project is bigger than one home. It represents an opportunity to educate the public on the energy savings and benefits green design offers over the long

term.

“The biggest hurdle the green market has right now is to educate the public,” he said. “Why should I spend 2 percent to 4 percent extra for something that’s green? The reason is, if you look at the life cycle of the product -- and as Americans, we have trouble looking at that; we look at what it will cost me right now -- you’ll see what you’ll save month to month, year to year.

“We can show you that the year-to-year cost of a green product much outweighs in savings that of the typical, run-of-the-mill house being built here in the Memphis market.”

On a smaller scale, making green choices might cost more in the short run, but the dividends can be priceless.

“Long-term, if you’re using paint with no VOCs -- meaning you’re not breathing junk -- and it costs \$4 more a gallon, I think it’s worth it,” Blackwell said.

Hnedak Bobo Group interior designer Stephanie Sabbe, advisor of the USGBC affiliate group Emerging Green Builders, borrowed a phrase she heard at a recent meeting of the Urban Land Institute to explain her passion for green design: “The exceptions we make today will be the standard for the next generation.”

“I thought it was the best one-sentence reason I’ve ever heard for why we should change

direction now and not five years from now,” she said.

Why use green

“There are indirect and direct ways that what we use to build our homes and buildings is bad for us and the environment,” said Jules Paulk, founder and executive director of the Sowing Green Collaborative. Here are a few reasons Paulk lists:

“Off-gassing” of volatile organic compounds, or VOCs, from materials and products. Think “new car smell.” It seems like a good thing, but it is actually not good for us. The results include asthma and other respiratory problems, rashes and skin issues from contact, headaches and other poisoning symptoms, all the way to cancer.

Formaldehyde. There are two types of naturally occurring formaldehyde: phenol, not so bad, and urea, BAD. In building, we want to see materials and products that have no added urea formaldehyde in them. Often you will find added formaldehyde in wood products where particle board is used, and it can often be found in stains, sealants and adhesives.

Impact of energy being consumed in our homes and buildings. Most of our homes are not built to the prevalent energy codes in the United States.

What to look for:

The Green Seal. This nonprofit group sets environmental standards for a wide range of products. Look for the Green Seal designation on qualifying paints, sealants, coat-

ings, adhesives and cleaning products.

Green Label from the Carpet & Rug Institute is a designation to look for in carpeting. GreenGuard certification is a primary designation for furniture, Paulk said.

Energy Star. The Energy Star label graces household products and appliances that meet energy efficiency guidelines set forth by the Environmental Protection Agency and the U.S. Department of Energy.

© 2008 Memphis Commercial Appeal. All rights reserved.