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Getting green under one roof

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A Countertop made from a composite of recycled, compressed paper costs about the same as one made of granite.

In his small way, Michael Schaeffer hopes to change that.

Schaeffer, a longtime California home builder who started using more-efficient methods before "eco-friendly" was a catchphrase, has started the Green Building Exchange in Redwood City, a kind of year-round trade show, education center and retail shop designed to steer builders away from natural resources and low-efficiency items and toward cabinets made from reclaimed sorghum straw and non-electrical glow-in-the-dark "exit" signs.

Today, homeowners, contractors, real estate agents and architects will get the first chance to wander through the exchange's offices (painted with low-toxicity paint and furnished with re-used cubicle partitions, of course) and check out the 50 or so vendors.

"Five years ago when I moved here, 'green' and 'sustainable' weren't the words you used in building," said Schaeffer, who preferred home building to studying as a teenager in Santa Barbara. "Now it's clear there are better, more-efficient ways to build."

"And if we can move the market away from conventional products, and make (sustainable ones) easier to find ... we can start changing the economics."

The exchange is in a nondescript office building near Highway 101 in Redwood City. So far there are only about 50 companies signed up for space in the 55,000-square-foot, three-story building. But Schaeffer is shooting for about 100 more, and expects to complete a deal for a Chicago exchange soon.

Schaeffer doesn't collect a portion of the sales, but charges rent of about \$950 a month for a 10-foot-by-4-foot spot (kitchen and bathroom fixtures manufacturer



Chronicle / Michael Maloney

Michael Schaeffer shows off his Green Building Exchange, which opens today in Redwood City.

Kohler is expected to take up several cubicles). Vendors, city governments, environmental groups and others can use the conference rooms for free for workshops, meetings or other gatherings.

Schaeffer, who owns a small design-build firm, doesn't decide what constitutes "green." In an industry where there seems to be a fair amount of "greenwashing" - using any shred of environmental friendliness to market a product or property - Schaeffer expects consumers to be the judge.

"If (a vendor) has a product that uses 3 percent recycled material, versus someone over there who's using 98 percent recycled material, that's the consumer's choice," he said.

As talk of global warming, carbon footprints and renewable resources dominates the news, more people are re-examining how they live and what they buy. While builders of large-scale developments have been slower to adopt sustainable techniques and products, that is changing. The U.S. Green Building Council said this month that its membership has topped 10,000. And the value of green building is expected to exceed \$12

billion this year, up from a negligible amount 10 years ago.

Many smaller builders - particularly in places such as the Bay Area or Chicago - are leading the way. For instance, Harrell Remodeling, a Mountain View contractor, uses oak floors only when matching one already installed. Its default flooring material is bamboo.

"Some (builders) are green on energy, others are green on interior products, others on recycling," said Iris Harrell, president and chief executive of the company. "Not everyone is green in the same way. But they're all valid and all good."

Schaeffer's road to creating the exchange started with the remodeling of a Redwood City home two years ago. The owner of the modest, 1,300-square-foot house wanted a second story and a more-sustainable structure. So Schaeffer, who owned a building company in Fresno before moving to the Bay Area, went to work. But it was difficult to find all of the materials and expertise that he wanted. The idea for the exchange was born.

Reaction to the house was mixed, however, much as the overall public sentiment about green building. Although Schaeffer's client loved her "urban barn" that featured a concrete finish requiring no paint, the neighbors were less pleased. One posted a sign comparing the house to a 7-Eleven store, and neighbors' complaints were loud enough that the matter went before the city. Schaeffer and his client made some concessions on the facade.

"A lot of towns have rules that are based on aesthetics and not function," said Schaeffer, 48.

One of the biggest barriers to green building and finishes, however, is price. While many people are aware of the ecological benefits of water-on-demand systems and recycled-glass countertops, they don't want to pay extra for them, according to Calli Schmidt, environmental communications director for the National Association of Home Builders in Washington.

"People are concerned about global warming, yes, and they want energy efficiency, but they want to be paid back for that outlay in five years, or yes, they want energy efficiency, but they also want granite countertops," Schmidt said.

Consol, a Stockton energy consulting firm to production builders, estimates that to comply with its

green building program - it has higher requirements than California codes, which are the most stringent in the country - builders must shell out an extra 1 to 2 percent of their costs. In California, where housing affordability is so critical, that can add thousands of dollars to the price of a home or cut profit by that much. Until costs are comparable with conventional products and practices, there may be more light green than dark green.

Still, some green is better than none.

"The marketing spin on it is that there are shades of green, but the fact of the matter is, it's true," said Justin Dunning, green programs manager at ConSol. "Some people are able to afford a larger step than others.

"As more and more companies come in producing these kinds of products, the products will come down (in price) and the burden on the builders will become less and less."

While there are plenty of online green vendors and retail shops that sell eco-friendly gear, Dunning said he hasn't come across another exchange of this type. He expects it to be a good resource for the growing ranks of the green-curious.

"Especially in California, the perception of green has adjusted so dramatically in the last year," Dunning said. "Before, it was us going to builders saying 'Be green.' Now, we're being approached by builders who are saying, 'What am I going to do about my carbon footprint?'"

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