

# How to Choose a Green Building Professional

by Scott Allred

*Do you want to build a more energy-efficient, durable and healthier home - one that's easy on the planet and on your pocketbook too? Are you wondering how to find someone who can build such a building? Read on!*

## Where Can I Find a Green Building Professional?

### First Things First!

Before you start interviewing builders or designers, be sure to clarify your own wants and needs. For example, do you prefer a fairly standard-looking house in a standard subdivision? Or would you prefer something unique? Are you fascinated by high-tech or do you prefer the simplest possible approach, even “old-fashioned” looks and ways of doing things? Are you adventuresome and ready to try all sorts of new ideas or would you rather stick to standard methods and materials? Would you like to work intimately with the builder in developing your plans, specifications and building process, or would you rather just be presented with a finished product? Do you or the other building occupants have any special health problems which must be addressed?

Bear in mind that there is no such thing as *the perfect green building*, so make the best choices you can given your budget, personality, taste, lifestyle and philosophy. Other issues, including the availability of materials and expertise in your area, and the present state of our understanding of building technology and what *building green* means will also significantly impact your building decisions.

### How Green is Your Builder or Designer?

Even though you are looking for a *green* builder or designer, don't neglect to get all the usual information. Be sure you find out what this builder or designer's track record is for building a good product, on budget and on time. Find out how long their company has been in business and if this building professional can talk to you in a straightforward way about costs. Most importantly, you need to know if you are likely to be compatible with this builder over the long haul of what can sometimes be an arduous and intimate process.

Once you have satisfied yourself on all these matters, go on to “greener” questions, but remember, when considering working with *any* professional, choose your battles wisely. The chances of finding a professional who can favorably answer *all* of these questions are slim.

- Does this building professional have a green philosophy of building? Does this person understand how building practices relate to the broader environment? Does it matter to him or her how our use of resources will affect the world we leave for our children? Do you think this person is trying to give you the “right answers” just to get your money, or do they demonstrate real commitment to the health of the planet?
- Does this person demonstrate a general knowledge of green building? If you ask about things like low-VOC paints, non-ozone-depleting insulation, heating and cooling design by Manual J, composting, sealed-combustion appliances, passive solar design, do you just get a blank stare? Chances are, this person is not a really a green building professional. Be sure to do your homework on these topics first!

- If you are interested in an unconventional material or technique, does this person have the expertise and experience to provide you with it? You might, for example, be interested in a rainwater collection system, or an earth-sheltered house. If no one in the area has done what you want, can this professional demonstrate the ability to accomplish something out of the ordinary?
- Does this person keep up with advances in the field of green building? Do they attend Green Building Council meetings, seminars, and conferences? Read major publications on the green building industry? Are they familiar with innovative local green building projects? Does the builder know who in the area is doing various kinds of green building?
- Does this person understand the importance of a team approach in producing a good green home? A building is a system, all parts affecting all other parts. Does the builder see the designer, the subcontractors, and you, the client, as equally important players on the same team, all working together to bring into being a high-quality building where you can be happy, comfortable, and productive?
- Is this builder proud and happy to show you their work? Is this builder glad to have you call on former clients and visit completed projects? What green measures have they included in their past projects? What are they recommending for your particular project? How much will the building exceed any recognized standards? Can the person provide any warranties?

### What's This Going to Cost?

Do not be deterred from building green because you are afraid you can't afford it. It's true that some green building options cost more than the standard alternative, but some of the most environmentally-friendly buildings available are among the least costly. It pays to be a knowledgeable buyer, and as in many other purchases we make in our lives, you typically get what you pay for. A good green builder or designer has a real understanding of what truly makes a more environmentally-friendly building and knows precisely what to specify to get it.

If a desirable option costs more up front, take the longest view you can. Examine how it would actually affect your monthly mortgage payment. Think about how often you might have to repair or replace this item. Consider how it will impact usage of resources and monthly utility bills. If the item has implications for occupant health, weigh this seriously, even if you can't put a precise dollar figure on it initially.

In summary, a home is typically the largest financial decision most families ever make. Make sure you have a realistic understanding of your wants and needs, and then find the most qualified builder to help you with your green choices. A good *green builder* can you guide you through the costs, benefits, and pitfalls of common green building techniques. A good *green builder* will help you find ways to marry form and function, as well as find ways to help you realize your dreams without compromising the things that are most important. A builder who can't deliver on his promises will just leave you seeing red. ◆



*Scott Allred owns and operates Precept Construction in the Triad of North Carolina. Scott is currently serving on the Board of Directors for the Greater Greensboro Builders Association and is the Chairman of the Triad Green Building Council. Precept Construction specializes in Energy Star certified homes and Green Building techniques. Precept builds custom homes from \$275,000 to one million dollars, and is a Gold Award Builder recipient in 2004, 2005, 2007 and 2008.*

