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An academic approach yields unrivaled designs

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The evolution, ascendancy, and future of LEED



# BUILDING BLOCKS OF THE FUTURE

Advocates tout modular housing as being less costly and more eco-friendly. Is it enough to propel the United States out of a real-estate crisis?

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# BUCK O'NEILL BUILDERS, INC.

Embracing the idea of creating a sustainable future and an environment for healthful living

by Anita R. Paul

MOST NEW HOMEOWNERS DO NOT know much more about green-building practices than what they have researched online or heard about from friends or builders who claim to be green. What Buck O'Neill, president of Buck O'Neill Builders, Inc., gives them is an education. "We enlighten them on new technologies that are alternatives to industry standards," he says of the clients for whom he builds high-end, sustainable homes. "I don't sell 'green.' I offer sustainable alternatives. If you want to call it green, great."

O'Neill's idea of green building includes more than just installing low-flow toilets and recycling wood on the job site. His sustainable practices embrace the idea of creating a sustainable future and an environment for healthful living. Incorporating processes that support sustainability throughout an entire building project is critical to producing what Buck O'Neill Builders considers a green home. These processes range from using low-VOC paints to applying eco-friendly insulation and changing the concrete-mix design to minimize off-gassing.

O'Neill explains that there are many different tiers to green building. On one level, there is the actual design and construction of a home. Equally important is the education of the homeowners; after all, they are the key to deciding whether to incorporate sustainable elements into the building. Similarly, the homeowner is responsible for ensuring that their ongoing activities in the home support sustainability. Although there are not many monetary incentives for incorporating green or sustainable elements into new homes in California's San Francisco Bay Area—where the company is based—O'Neill does what he can to educate people about sustainable alternatives. "People want what they want, but they don't want to wait five to ten years to recover the cost [of green features]," he says.

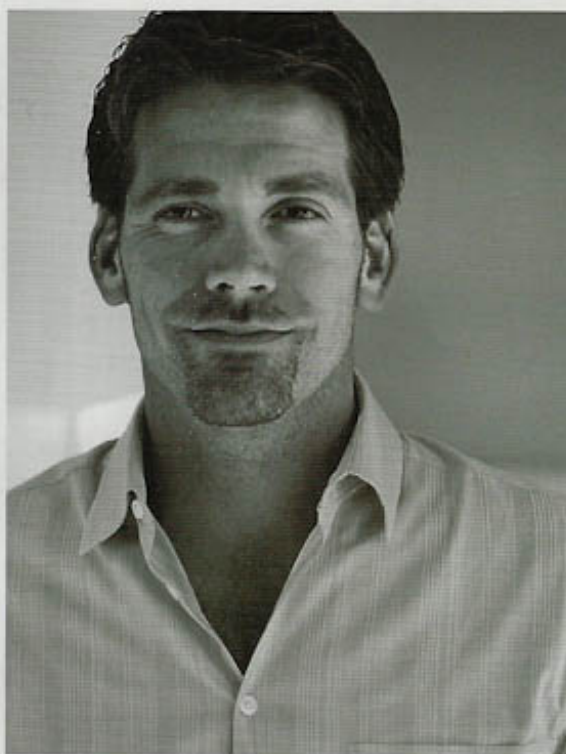
"I'm a big proponent of small stepping stones; getting everyone more mindful of their day-to-day activities," O'Neill says, referring not only to his clients, but also to his employees—all of whom are experienced and certified in sustainable building and have seen a lot of waste on other job sites. As a result, they make a conscious effort to incorporate environmentally responsible practices

**WELCOME HOME**  
This San Francisco home's exterior features plaster castings, flex moulding, and low-VOC paints. Inside, prefinished bamboo covers the floor; FSC-certified wood was used for the trim, doors, and framework; and the ceiling trusses are reclaimed wood.



"This is not a learning company; I only hire seasoned veterans who know how to do this kind of work."

—Buck O'Neill, President



such as reusing building materials, using local vendors to minimize a project's carbon footprint, seeking sustainable alternatives from suppliers and subcontractors, and encouraging waste reduction on the job site and in the office. "We're all tree huggers to an extent," O'Neill says of his full-time staff, who all bring varied and valuable skills and interests to the job site. Experienced in modern design, Victorian restoration, solar-panel technology, and sustainable design, every one of the professionals at Buck O'Neill Builders understands the detail and expertise that goes into building or renovating a high-end sustainable residence.

O'Neill has seen a decline in work since the downward shift in the economy. However, he says his company has thrived by staying small and relying on the experience of his staff. "This is not a learning company," he says. "I only hire seasoned veterans who know how to do this kind of work." Consequently, while other builders are scaling down, Buck O'Neill Builders expects more business. "We actually listen and we call back," O'Neill explains. A simple and somewhat basic business principle, but one that often goes overlooked, even in good times. Despite what economic indicators might suggest, the

demand for luxury homes still exists, and the market is more aware than ever about the need for and the benefits of incorporating sustainable elements into a home. Fortunately for O'Neill, he is well positioned to take the market by storm.

On schedule to complete three projects in 2011, one of the company's newest prize homes is nearly a dream come true. With the owner opting for all green options, Buck O'Neill Builders has installed a vegetative roof, a rainwater-harvesting system, greywater recycling, xeriscape landscaping, and eco-friendly Aircrete insulation, among other green elements. During construction, the crew used reclaimed wood for truss designs throughout the house, certified wood for the entire framing package, and environmentally friendly sealants, caulks, and glues. When the project is complete, O'Neill anticipates it will earn LEED Silver certification at the minimum.

Admittedly, O'Neill has experienced a learning curve as he educates clients about how to build to LEED standards, but he says it is all worth it. "Some would consider it a niche. I consider it good building," he says. "It's the way I was brought up in the trade." **gb&d**