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SPECIAL REPORT: Eco-Friendly Building Materials and Techniques Explored at Green Panel Moderated by MHN

By Kelly Sheehan, Online News Editor

JUNE 27, 2007 -- New York -- Industry experts recently spoke at "The Green Advantage: Setting Your Project Apart with Eco-Friendly Finishes," a panel sponsored by Carnegie and Multi-Housing News in Manhattan. The panelists discussed green design materials and methods, in terms of cost, health benefits, ease of maintenance, aesthetics and impact on the marketing of multifamily for-sale and rental units.



The event, held on June 19 at the Carnegie Showroom on West 25th Street, featured panelists John Renner, architect with Becker+Becker (TBC); Tim Button, partner with Stedila Design; Michael Gulich, senior architect with Croxton Collaborative; Pam Lippe, president of E4 Inc.; and Mark Rusitzky, associate architect with Cook+Fox Architects. Diana Mosher, editor-in-chief of Multi-Housing News, moderated the event.

Kicking off the discussion, Mosher commented that green design originally began in the commercial real estate area, and only recently has it been heating up in the residential real estate sector. Lippe explained, "People care most about their homes. But people didn't know that green buildings existed four or five years ago. Once they realized, the demand for green residential design picked up."

The U.S. Green Building Council's (USGBC) Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) program was originally designed for commercial building, Renner added. "It was hard for residential developers and architects to find a quantifiable benchmark to shoot for," he said. "Now that LEED has residential programs, it's helped the situation."

Green building is becoming more and more economically feasible, Gulich commented. It is also providing companies with additional marketing and branding leverage. But Lippe said that buyers should beware of "green washing"—when properties are marketed as being green communities, but have little to show for the self-imposed label. "A lot of people don't know that much about LEED," she said. "But as time goes on, people will begin to ask, 'Well, why aren't you LEED-certified?'"

When discussing whether green building is more viable in for-sale or for-rent properties, Renner noted that when development and design teams tackle rental projects, saving money on operating expenses is a "clear financial benefit." But this is not the case in for-sale projects, where developers don't know how much the consumer values green design. "Will they become more focused on the price of their mortgage than on whether their utility bill will be slightly lower?" he asked.

Lippe agreed, and said that it all comes down to who is paying for the environmentally friendly materials and building techniques, and who is benefiting from them. If a developer sells condominiums that he built using eco-friendly methods and materials that are more expensive than conventional materials and methods, he is less likely to reap the benefits of green design than the green developer who builds for-rent units. "Because of this, the rental market has been a little more responsive," Lippe noted. "But as demand increases, we're also seeing green design in for-sale projects."

Renner said that there are many ways to earn LEED certification points without spending \$500,000 on a photovoltaic system—which, he adds, might only add a single LEED point. Using recycled content is an easy way to rack up the points without spending more than a developer or designer would on conventional materials.

Button said that developers and designers should try to use materials that are made locally, in order to cut

down on transportation costs and emissions. But don't be tricked, he advised. Button once ordered stones from a plant in New England, only to find out later that the stones were being shipped to and from Italy to be cut. "It was a 'Oh my God—why couldn't we have used a cutter here?' moment," Button noted. "We had just assumed that the cutting would be taking place here."

"Interior designers and owners make decisions all the time in an effort to create the look they want," Lippe added. "You can do a green building without a photovoltaic system, green roof, etc. Take those out of the equation and there is no reason you can't produce a green building at the same price."

But remember that there are many factors designers and developers must consider when building green, Renner said. "While the finishes on a building are important, saving energy and water can be the most important," he noted. "If you build a huge development on former farmland, it's probably not going to feel good, even if you have green finishes."

Gulich advised listeners to start as early as possible when planning green projects. "It's more expensive when you start too late," he said.

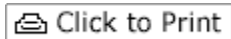
Lippe said that she believes that green design isn't a fad. "This is addressing a problem that the industry has identified," she said. "Not everything is going to be platinum, but the market is responding." Button added that green design also addresses a liability issue. "Frankly, if residents get sick, you're liable," he said.

Renner said that today, affordable housing in the country is even being built green. "Our country has a history of producing poor affordable housing for the low-income," he said. "This new trend is something to celebrate."

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