

YOUR (GREEN) HOME

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CODE GREEN Megan Hyatt and son Kaden in their Cambridge condo, one unit in the state's first LEED-certified house.

FITTING IN

The state's first LEED-certified house saves energy without anyone noticing.

By EMILY SHARTIN | February 4, 2007

There doesn't seem to be anything unusual about the building at 53 Standish Street in Cambridge. Yes, the three-decker, with its Nantucket gray siding, is new and modern-looking, but it fits in neatly with the older multifamily homes on this quiet street near Huron Village.

Inside, the open floor plans, bamboo floors, and sleek appliances seem in keeping with those of many other stylish urban condos found around Greater Boston these days.

But this house is the first in Massachusetts certified by the US Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, or LEED, program, which sets standards for both commercial and residential projects. LEED-certified houses typically use at least 30 percent less energy than those built with conventional methods and materials, says Jay Hall, the program's acting manager. John Livermore, who monitored the Cambridge project on behalf of Conservation Services Group in Westborough, a local administrator of the LEED program, estimates that the building uses half the energy of a similarly sized conventional residential property.

Tapping in to what they see as a growing interest in environmentally friendly living, Cambridge-based Aedi Development set out to create a multifamily house that consumes less energy and water, has better indoor air quality, and incorporates recycled and locally sourced materials. The result, by Livermore's estimate, is a building as beneficial to the planet as 1½ acres of trees.

"Green" building may conjure images of wind turbines, composting toilets, and solar ovens, but while this building is wired for solar panels (it is up to condo owners whether to install them), the home met LEED standards by promoting energy and water efficiency, using sustainable materials, and improving air quality.

"We set out to achieve sustainable luxury," says Norman Beaulieu, an Aedi principal. "People don't have to compromise on their lifestyle."

Aedi Construction undertook a gut rehab of an existing triple-decker, stripping the building down to the studs and refitting the units with modern, eco-friendly finishes. Recycled-glass tile is used for a backsplash in the kitchen, counters are made of recycled stone, wood doors are non-formaldehyde and wood trims sustainably harvested, and paints, caulking, and sealants are low in chemicals known as volatile organic compounds, or VOCs, which can affect indoor air quality.

Some of the most energy-efficient features are things you don't see, such as on-demand water heaters – which, unlike conventional systems that store hot water, use energy only when a faucet is turned on. The windows have a special coating that helps keep heat in during the winter, and walls are insulated with a high-density material made of recycled newspapers.

The three units sold for between \$635,000 and \$699,000 within six months of the building's completion a year ago. Though two couples say they were not specifically looking for a green building, it ended up being a selling point.

Barbara Scherer, a musician, and her husband, Mike, a Harvard professor, downsized considerably when they moved from a large house in Pennsylvania to their 1,272-square-foot second-floor unit.

"We would not have bought something this small except that it was a green building," says Barbara, who notes that in her native Germany, energy-efficient buildings are more the norm. "When I saw this place, I felt it was

the right decision. We do have a responsibility to live this way.”

The couple’s unit is also proof that green can come in many styles. They have taken a sleek, modern space and given it a traditional flair with antiques and custom built-ins by New Hampshire carpenter Michael McNemar.

For fellow condominium owner Megan Hyatt, who lives in the 1,467-square-foot first-floor duplex unit with her husband, Nabeel Hyatt, and their 2-year-old son, Kaden, having a young child underscored the importance of features like low-chemical paint and a high-quality ventilation system.

“It just felt safe,” says Megan Hyatt.

Matt Ayers, a principal of Aedi Construction, estimates that green materials are about 3 percent more costly than conventional products. The building techniques are basically the same, however; they just demand more attention to detail to ensure, for example, that the home is tightly sealed. The Green Building Council estimates that people in green homes save an average of \$60 a month on energy and water, which over a short time is enough to cover the extra costs of construction.

For Beaulieu, the issue is not so much cost as responsibility.

“This is something we wanted to be committed to for the long term,” he says. “Even if oil prices come down, I don’t think this is going to go away.” ■

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