

Local “Healthy Building” Group Lends Support to Habitat for Humanity and Greenpeace

The Hickory Consortium, a national consulting collaborative of architects, engineers and builders based in Acton, MA, is providing their expertise in healthy, sustainable building to a joint project of Habitat for Humanity and Greenpeace in New Orleans, LA. This is ground-breaking because it eliminates almost all PVC (poly vinyl chloride, the material commonly found in vinyl siding), from a typical affordable home construction project. The project is intended to serve as a model for other housing aiming at quality construction, health, affordability, durability and comfort with lower than average maintenance costs. The architect, long dedicated to healthy building technologies, is Bruce Hampton AIA.

Habitat for Humanity, well known for helping low-income families achieve home ownership, and Greenpeace, famous for its success in exposing global environmental problems and promoting solutions, joined forces in 2003 to build a house that is not only affordable but environmentally responsible and better for residents' health. Concerned about the serious health side effects of PVC, from manufacture through use and then disposal, Greenpeace and Habitat developed Habitat's first 99% free PVC-free home. Louisiana is the ideal place for this demonstration home: its toxic legacy is epitomized by the moniker “Cancer Alley”, an industrial corridor where more than 140 petrochemical producers and users are located.

As explained on the Greenpeace USA website (www.greenpeaceusa.org), PVC, one of the most widely used plastics on the market, is also the single most environmentally-damaging of all plastics. Its production and its disposal in land fills results in the release of toxic, chlorine-based chemicals which build up in the air, water and food chain; living in close proximity to PVC is also hazardous. Accumulations can result in severe health problems including cancer, immune system damage and hormone disruption. Sadly, Louisiana has seen first-hand the results of contamination resulting from PVC production. Two small towns had to be completely evacuated and razed due to groundwater contamination, toxic air releases and health problems caused by neighboring vinyl factories.

This demonstration project between Habitat and Greenpeace has not occurred without strife, however. For the past nine years, the Vinyl Institute has contributed both money and manpower to assist in building several Habitat homes utilizing vinyl products including siding, flooring and wall covering. Now, they feel betrayed. The clear message with this new home is “No vinyl.” However, as more and more homebuilders, financiers and developers are discovering, environmentally-friendly, low-cost alternatives to PVC and other toxic materials are making affordable, healthy, sustainable housing a viable product. As with any product, consumer desires are the only thing that keeps it in the market. As consumers are becoming aware of the hazards and dangers associated with PVC and similarly toxic building materials, they are seeking out healthy alternatives, many of which are readily available at comparable costs, although some have a long way to go.

As Habitat has discovered, sustainable housing is even more affordable over the long term by virtue of its very components and how they are put together. The US Department of Energy has documented millions of dollars saved in energy costs from tracking buildings made this way. Private and public research show increasingly that profound health benefits accrue to residents in homes that use environmentally responsible materials and construction methods instead of vinyl and other toxic materials. Consistently, evidence also documents that the members of society most susceptible to illness caused by environmentally unhealthy homes are also those with the fewest resources to prevent or change this.

In order to successfully build this home, Habitat for Humanity engaged the services of Bruce Hampton AIA, who has dedicated his practice for many years to healthy, green affordable

housing. Mr. Hampton is a member of the Hickory Consortium, which provides advice nationally on green building materials and processes. Mr. Hampton and the Hickory Consortium have extensive experience in green building and are also responsible for Erie Ellington Homes, a 50 unit affordable housing complex in Dorchester, MA that has won many awards and is considered an international model for this kind of construction.

Eliminating PVC from the construction of a new home is a significant task. As explained by two Hickory Consortium engineers, Mark Kelley and Richard Gregor, PVC materials are found everywhere throughout the average home. Literally pounds of PVC-jacketed wiring snakes throughout our homes, connecting telephones, cable television, internet connections, thermostat, electrical conduits, even the doorbell. Flooring materials, trim, wallpaper, shower curtains, cabinetry and carpeting can also contain substantial amounts of PVC, not to mention exterior siding, handrails, fences and now complete, out-of-the-box outbuildings.

Through the efforts of Habitat for Humanity, Greenpeace and the Hickory Consortium, an affordable house 99% free of toxic substances is being built in New Orleans and will act as a model for other houses around the country. Jesa Damora, Executive Director of Hickory Consortium expressed the feelings of all involved, "We at Hickory applaud the effort to make homes healthier, and are available to offer the ability to design and build healthy housing affordably, creating homes that are both economical and healthy."

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