



Habitat for Humanity's Impact on Green Home Market



By Heather King | September 12th, 2011 | 1 Comment



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Habitat for Humanity is one of the world's leading builders; in 2010, they built and sold over 38,000 homes. Build 100 ranked them the [sixth largest builder](#) in the U.S.

Habitat's primary charter is 'safe, affordable, decent housing for the poor.' Yet, the celebrated non-profit is an increasingly important player in the green building market.

"Habitat is very aware that the built environment is a major factor in [GHG emissions](#)," asserts Mary Kelley, Habitat's Leadership Development Officer. "Most of our affiliates are independent non-profits, so the impetus to adopt greener practices comes largely from individual chapters. But we are seeing more and more affiliates focus on building green." Many work with local, regional and national green certification organizations such as NAHB's green building program, LEED for Homes, Earthcraft and Green Point Rated.



Habitat does encourage affiliates to follow the EPA's Energy Star [EPA's Energy Star program](#) and indoor-air-plus programs. In fact, the non-profit is getting pressure from certain foundations to pay attention to efficiency and green materials. Recently, a HUD SHOP grant of \$15.3 million specifically required the affiliate to use Energy Star products.

Many Habitat affiliates build beyond these basic EPA standards. The [East Bay group](#) is a green building leader in the international network. [Habitat East Bay Green Building](#) is paying attention to the energy and resources going into their projects, as well as sourcing non-toxic materials. They are concerned about the impact on the environment and the impact on homeowner's health. They are also working to be sure these new homes are located near public transportation, so the daily lives of residents are lower impact and more cost efficient. For instance, a new project comprising 36 homes in South San Francisco is purposefully situated near BART, the Bay Area's Rapid Transit network.

Throughout California, all new Habitat homes have solar panels. These are an in-kind donation from PG&E. The accrued energy savings from these solar installations flows to the homeowners. Many of these green homes also use systems for recapturing rainwater, and conserving water use. Landscaping is drought tolerant and comprised of native species.

Habitat is also playing an important role in the national foreclosure crisis. They are actively buying and renovating foreclosed homes so that they do not become a blight and economic handicap in the local communities. In many cases, these homes are being upgraded to be more efficient and more livable. Because it can be more difficult to retrofit existing building stock with green materials and systems, they are not always improved to the same standards as the new. But between Energy Star appliances, better insulation and heating systems, the energy efficiency of these homes is greatly enhanced.

Habitat does not have data on how widespread the sustainability focus is among its affiliates, but Ms. Kelley senses is that it is expanding and it will catch on virally.

Even in rural locations like south central Idaho, a project in the town of Bellevue was built to LEED standards. According to Rebekah Helzel, founder of ARCH, the local affordable housing initiative, the out of pocket costs for this green house were somewhat higher, but most of the more costly materials were donated. Importantly, the operating costs of the house are materially lower, especially during the cold northern winters.

Today, the county sheriff and his 6 kids live in the newly constructed home. The family's carbon footprint has dropped radically. Not only does the sheriff live in a highly efficient home, he shorted his commute from 3 hours a day to 10 minutes a day.

As more affiliates embrace greener building practices, and learn from the example of the East Bay team, Habitat will generate a sea change in the [green building](#) market. Looking ahead, Habitat for Humanity could well be recognized for helping save the planet – as well as the poor.



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