

Thinning the Herd

How to pick the best eco-builder

by Dina Lima and Michael Strong



Introduction

Builders and remodelers are often seen in the same light as attorneys and auto mechanics—necessary, tolerated, but not especially embraced by society. That may be because in most places, the bar is set pretty low to become a builder or remodeler. Unfortunately, a lot of underqualified folks get into the trades. Many backed in because they couldn't think of anything else to do and the home-building market was booming. But surely there are some good (and even great) builders out there, right? So how do you go about selecting one? That's what this article is about.

The good news is that with such a low bar, it's pretty easy to eliminate quite a few candidates. Builders who focus on green construction set themselves apart right away because green building represents the next step in quality. It comes with built-in advantages (like comfort and low utility bills) and quality assurances (in the form of green ratings).

To select the best of the best, look to a builder's standard operating procedure, specifications, track record, and ability to communicate with you. If a builder can't communicate well with you (even if they can communicate well with others), the potential for mishaps in the construction process goes up, and that usually means higher cost and lower satisfaction. After all, building or remodeling a home is not done by most people more than once in a lifetime, and it's a huge investment. You might as well make it pay off!



Daniel Morrison, Managing Editor

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Thinning the Herd— How to pick the **best eco-builder**

The latest quality advances in green home building are providing choices to consumers that their parents could only dream of. Today's houses are less expensive to heat and cool, are more comfortable, and tread more lightly on the environment than any generation of houses before. If you hope to benefit from these innovations, it is vital to connect with a green builder who understands your needs and has the skills to meet them. You cannot just add some green products to a house and expect it to perform well; how the parts go together matters even more. So, how do you select the most qualified green builder or remodeler?

In addition to understanding green-building practices, great builders and remodelers **excel at communicating and organizing.**

In addition to understanding green-building practices, great builders and remodelers excel at communicating and organizing. Building and remodeling a house—green or otherwise—is a big project; the best builders are great project managers. Moreover, project management includes organization and communication. While communication, organization, and green-building techniques can be learned, it is best to find a builder who possesses them all right off the bat. Ultimately, the best builder or remodeler for you will be one who listens, asks and answers questions, has a great track record, is organized, is in tune with your style and tastes, and stays in touch.

Education is the fundamental part of your green-building experience

Knowledgeable builders educate their customers. The cornerstone of green building is a whole-house systems approach. What this means is that a knowledgeable builder considers all the components of building your home: the design; the location where your home will be built; and the materials that will be put into the house so that it conserves energy, is safer, is comfortable, and causes less stress on the environment.

A knowledgeable green builder will look at your home's design (especially one that you have picked out of a magazine), and will be able to tell you if that design will work in the climate in which you want to build. For example, a house with a high-pitched roof is not a good choice in the South. A high-pitched roof, although

elegant and attractive, will not protect your windows from the sun's heat on hot, humid days and you will end up with a large attic that turns into an oven.

A house has two "ovens" that you need to deal with: the attic and the garage. A detached garage is the preferred option to prevent chemicals and fumes from products normally stored in the garage from entering the home. A low-pitched roof encapsulated with

foam underneath the roof deck will keep all the ducts and furnace equipment in a conditioned space, where any minor leaks (if any) in the ductwork will not have an impact on the quality of the air that you and your family breathe. Although the aesthetics of your home are important, a well-informed green builder will tell you the truth you need to hear.

Another critical aspect your green builder will talk to you about is your home's orientation. If you know which direction the house will face, it can be designed with this in mind. For example, a home built in Texas needs to minimize the exposure of windows along the west wall, while at the same time take advantage of passive-solar

design techniques. Windows that face south and are located inside a patio or porch do not need to be low-emissivity.

A well-built home also eliminates air leaks. An airtight home is not drafty, but instead has even temperatures throughout to make you comfortable. In addition, a green-built home uses materials that improve indoor air quality, such as paints and flooring materials with low levels or no volatile organic compounds (VOCs). Moreover, a house built using green-building practices employs materials that can be replaced, reducing their environmental footprint.

Clear communication enhances the construction journey

Quality builders care about your needs, questions, and concerns. They listen to what you say. They hear what you may not be saying, and they clarify the issue. A great way to know if a builder genuinely cares about building your home is by learning what past clients have to say. Quality green builders are not ashamed to share customer testimonials with you; in fact, testimonials are often posted on their websites.

Questions to Ask Your Builder

- How do you follow a whole-house approach to build green homes?
- What techniques will you use to ensure that the home is comfortable when I live in it?
- What are some of the eco-friendly materials that you put into homes?

Great builders are problem solvers, and that may mean meeting your needs differently than you had envisioned.

Beyond testimonials, follow your instincts. Your first impression about someone is normally the correct one. As humans, we interact differently with other people; we bond more quickly with some than we do with others. Follow your heart when meeting with different builders, and look for comfort between the two of you. Let's face it, a builder can be the greenest builder in town and have a great track record, but if you cannot bond with him in this long-term relationship based on genuine concern for your desired end product, how comfortable and seamless do you think your journey will be?

A builder should ask (and answer) questions

As you review the construction specifications of prospective builders, make a list of specific questions that you would like the builder to answer. Those who return your emails or voicemails are great prospects, but also be sure that you get clear answers to questions about terms you may not understand such as "tankless water heater," "radiant barrier," "high-performance insulation," "sustainable," "high-performance," or "green."

Builders who ask questions as you explain your needs and desires are equally important. If they do not understand what you really want, you are likely to wind up with what is easiest to build. Great builders are problem solvers, and that may mean meeting your needs differently than you had envisioned. This kind of problem-solving comes from asking the right questions. The builders who prompt and respond to your questions are often very well organized.

Find a builder who is organized

You may think, "All businesses should be organized!" The truth is that many are not. This detail can mean the difference between a memorable meander and an arduous journey for you and your family. An organized green builder should provide you with some type of manual or information packet that explains in plain and simple language the process he goes through to build a high-performance home (within the price range you are considering) and the benefits of working with him. This does not have to be a paper document; indeed, many green builders stay away from paper as much as possible, so this information may appear on the builder's website.

Highly organized builders often integrate their homeowner's manual into the construction process. This helps tremendously in keeping you informed throughout construction about the green-building practices employed. In addition, you will know in advance when you need to make your selections in order not to disrupt the construction schedule. Other builders use sophisticated online systems in which you track the progress of your home through a password-protected account.

Value (usually) trumps price

A diligent search is important to find the best value in your building or remodeling project. This value does not necessarily mean the lowest price (in fact, it rarely does), but it does mean the best value in the context of your ideas, style, and needs, as well as the overall service needs.

Questions to Ask Past Customers

- What do you like most about your new home?
- What were the best, and worst, parts of the experience?
- How did this builder deal with the bad times?
- Would you hire this builder again?

Consider the big picture when determining value. Look at the promised home's health and environmental benefits. Consider the cost to run the home on a monthly basis when deciding on how much to spend up front, because the money you borrow will be paid back monthly as well. Energy-efficiency improvements rolled into a mortgage are often a better long-term buy than cost-cutting.

You can measure energy improvements with a utility bill. One way to measure health and environmental benefits is with third-party certifications, both for the home and for the builder. These green certifications, such as the ones listed at right, are a quality check for green homes. Know-

ing which green-building program(s) the builder typically uses (and there are many choices) will allow you the opportunity to study the benefits of such programs.

Also, look for builders who pursue continuing education. Those with designations have gone through training in order to stay abreast of green (and other) building practices. Even if builders pursue these letter designations simply to have them after their name, they are likely to have actually picked up something in the class. To be sure, scrutinize the builder's record of accomplishment. Don't stop at testimonials on a website. Request at least two references from your builder, and ask him about his experience (see sidebar, page 4). Asking for references from the two most recent customers is a good way to cut through a potential cherry-picking process.

Great builders are not afraid to market themselves online

Green builders are connected. Our society today is linked through online social media such as Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter. Search for builders who exhibit their green expertise through articles, photos, and videos of their projects posted on any of these sites or on their company website. Some builders may use Twitter to announce special open houses, Realtor workshops, or informational consumer seminars offered at their model homes, their job sites, or even via online webinars.

Quality green builders have content-rich websites that educate their customers. They know that buyers today surf the Internet for

everything before they buy. These savvy builders make sure their websites stay fresh with up-to-date information and that they address buyers' questions. They are not afraid to be transparent. Great builders actually enjoy educating consumers on the value and benefits found in their products.

Some green builders have a blog. Why is this important? Because you can learn more about your potential builder through his postings, which will help you determine if you are a good fit for each other. Builders may even "tweet" or offer webinars (live or recorded) that may be posted on their site or on YouTube.

More and more builders are using LinkedIn to connect with other professionals in their industry to bring you the best products, materials, and design considerations for your new home. You can also scan their profile page for recommendations.

Builders who stay up-to-date with innovations in green technology are trained in how to build homes that offer a cleaner, healthier environment for you and your family.

Your ideas, style, and needs matter

Builders target a specific customer base. Some work with first-time homebuyers only, some work with buyers looking for a semi-custom home, while other builders serve a full-custom, high-end market. Some build high-performance homes that include green products

Green Certifications

There are a few major national green rating systems and many local and regional ones. For information on choosing a rating system, click the links below or go to GreenBuildingAdvisor.com.

Green Ratings Overview

www.greenbuildingadvisor.com/ratings

Options for selecting a green rating system, from the major programs below:

- National Green Building Standard
www.greenbuildingadvisor.com/ngbs
- LEED for Homes
www.greenbuildingadvisor.com/leed
- Environments for Living
www.greenbuildingadvisor.com/efl
- Local Green Building Programs
www.greenbuildingadvisor.com/local

and building practices, while others focus on building zero-energy homes. There are also builders who focus on building for baby-boomers, and offer universal design features by creating spaces that are usable by all people. Some universal design features include zero-step entries, ramps, wider doorways, lever doorknobs for easy opening, lower thresholds, roll-in showers, grab bars in bathrooms, raised toilets, good lighting throughout, and kitchens designed with barrier-free and easy-to-reach features. Furthermore, there are those builders whose style leans more toward Old World and Mediterranean, and others who prefer a modern taste. Each of these markets is also within a particular price point. Don't choose a builder who tries to be everything to everyone. Successful builders stick to what they like and do well.

Acronym Soup

Green Organizations and Certifications

NAHB National Association of Home Builders

USGBC U.S. Green Building Council

BPI Building Performance Institute

HBI Home Builders Institute

LEED Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (USGBC)

LEED AP LEED Accredited Professional

CGP Certified Green Professional (NAHB)

CAPS Certified Aging in Place Specialist (NAHB)

CGB Certified Graduate Builder (NAHB)

CSP Certified New Homes Sales Professional (NAHB)

RCS Residential Construction Superintendent (HBI)

GMB Graduate Master Builder (NAHB)

Within this target style and customer base, builders have a list of specifications regarding function, design, green, and health-promoting benefits. They also typically offer a list of optional choices. Take the time to look at the specifications that resonate with your particular needs.

How do you start "thinning the herd"?

Following are some tips as you begin your hunt for a green builder. First, assess your needs and wants. Determine why you want to build or remodel green by answering these fundamental questions: Are you looking for reduced maintenance? Do you want to enjoy a healthier indoor environment? Do you want universal design features? Do you want the benefit of lower energy bills? Do you want to make your personal contribution to the environment? What earth-friendly features must be part of your home? What are your must-have and would-be-nice-to-have finishing items? What price range are you

seeking? As you answer these questions, there may be other great reasons that arise.

Second, search for a floor plan that meets your needs and desires but is adequate for the climate where you live. If you live in a hot or humid area, choose a design with longer roof overhangs (which means a lower roof pitch) that will protect your windows and reduce the size of one of the two ovens in the house (the attic).

If the size of the lot allows, opt for a detached garage to eliminate the second oven from your home. If this is not possible, make sure that the common wall between the living space and the garage is treated as an exterior wall for added protection of the home's energy efficiency and your family's health.

Third, educate yourself further on the topic of a "whole-house approach" to green building so that you can prepare to ask your potential builder the right questions. Learn more about region-specific home design, home orientation, and health-promoting materials that are healthier for you and that reduce their environmental footprint.

Follow these foundational steps, and you will complete about 80% of your search for your ideal builder. Once you have determined what is important to you and have found the builders who offer what you are looking for, it will be much easier for you to pick the best eco-builder well qualified to realize your dreams.

MORE TO EXPLORE

Green Primer—20 Questions
(www.greenbuildingadvisor.com/primer)



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