

REAL ESTATE

Done Deals: Recent home sales in southeastern Wisconsin. 4F



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John Porter used recycled glass tiles around the mirrors in his children's bathroom and durable maple cabinets when he remodeled his Muskego home. He found that there was no definitive answer on what was really green.

What's really GREEN?

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Muskego — John Porter looked for green but found shades of gray.

The dated, worn kitchen in his 33-year-old Muskego house had to be replaced. While he was remodeling, he figured that he would try to be environmentally friendly in the process.

The west-facing room could capture more sunlight and warmth if it had bigger, energy-efficient windows, Porter thought. Surely the construction debris could be recycled. But he quickly learned that going green isn't as simple as it sounds. Do high-quality maple cabinets count because they'll last? Is the granite counter ecologically defensible?

"There's no definitive line on what makes a product or process more green," Porter says in his kitchen, which was finished in the spring.

Green has sprouted all over the home building and remodeling in-

dustries. Well-respected national organizations are laboring to fashion a national standard from a welter of competing certifications offered by self-appointed consultants and specialty building associations. Meanwhile, manufacturers and contractors are putting a green spin on materials and techniques. It's up to consumers to figure out what's green and what's not.

"Everyone wants to make their product green. That's the market buzz right now," says Matthew Leonard, of PEA (Progressive Environmental Alternatives) Builders Inc. in Muskego.

"It's kind of like food labeling," he adds, in that there's plenty of information available but consumers are on their own to decipher the ingredient listings and figure out what they mean.

The U.S. Green Building Council has been adding guidelines for builders to its Leadership in Energy

The burden is on consumers to figure out what meets standards

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Consumer faces gray areas

and Environmental Design, or LEED, program, which outlines the processes and products that make for a green project. It is collaborating with the National Association of Homebuilders (NAHB) and other groups on a national standard for green building. The standard is likely to be introduced this year.

Meanwhile the association rolled out a green building training program in 2005, accompanied by a third-party certification that scores individual houses against a menu of green attributes, such as water conservation, to garner enough points to get the builders' stamp of approval.

It's the whole that counts

That system has been operating for more than three years, but the association's program to certify builders in green techniques launched only in February. To date, 863 people have completed the certification; three are from Wisconsin, none in metro Milwaukee.

Just because a builder has an NAHB green certification doesn't mean that every house he or she builds is automatically green-certified, says Calli Schmidt, environmental communications director for the association.



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Solutions, a 15-year-old Waukesha building materials retailer and wholesaler, "You throw in some low-VOC (volatile organic compound) paint and Energy Star appliances — that's not a green house. It's a house with some green features. You have to look at the whole system of building."

Green ambitions quickly bog down in specifics.

"At this point, we're kind of stuck with buyer beware. If buyers are truly seeking green alternatives, they have to take it upon themselves to do extra homework and identify the appropriate sources," says Scot Chase, vice president for TerraChoice Environmental Marketing, a Canadian firm that analyzes and ranks green products.

That homework is considerable.

Often, companies base their green claims on a single product attribute or building process — things that can be negated by other factors.

For instance, the energy expended in mining and shipping over long distances typically offsets the virtues of

natural stone, say builders and building consultants.

Likewise, bamboo became trendy for floors because it grows quickly. But now, consultants say, it's so popular that some Asian farmers are clear-cutting forests to plant bamboo to export to the West.

Durability a consideration

Most consumers probably would consider product durability as simply buying good quality materials that will last. That was one factor in Porter's decision to install maple cabinets in his new kitchen. It could count as green when consumers reject the American throwaway mentality that permeates so many purchases, Chase says. That's how persuading customers to upgrade from "better" to "best" can be positioned as a green decision, he says.

The builders association's Schmidt is skeptical of claims that the biodegradability of an entire house should count. Likewise, universal design — the notion that a house should be barrier-free to accommodate homeowners as they age

John Porter (left) had green in mind when he had Francis Jones of Callen Design Group remodel the kitchen and a bathroom in his Muskego home. An energy-efficient window was added to the kitchen to maximize the use of passive solar energy.

— is laudable, but debatable as a green characteristic.

Green is tinting one of the fun parts of building or remodeling: choosing finish materials.

Pace counsels consumers that they'll have to decide which definition of green fits their project. They can focus on chemical-free, natural materials for an interior environment that's free of toxins and gas-emitting materials. They can focus on sustainability — materials that are recycled or natural. Or they can focus on the carbon footprint of the materials and building process. But they aren't likely to get all three in the same project.

Consider a new countertop made of recycled glass embedded in a concrete mixture. It's made of sustainable and natural materials, and it's pretty, but it's heavy and expensive to ship.

Easy places to start

Many consumers instinctively revert to a standard they know well: savings in the household operating budget.

John Jewell, owner of 3-year-old Jewell Homes in Muskego, says customers are looking for energy-efficient construction that minimizes heating and cooling bills. They're even willing to spend a few thousand dollars more for insulated concrete form

construction, which delivers an R value (that's a measure of thermal efficiency) of 40, compared with the R value of 11 netted by the usual insulated wood-frame construction.

"When people look at energy efficiency, they always look for the payback," he says.

Simple changes can achieve some of the current green building guidelines, even if the owner doesn't want to hit every mark, adds Francis Jones, a design team manager with Callen Design Group. One increasingly popular item: built-in water filtration systems that make tap water as palatable as bottled water, potentially minimizing the household's consumption of plastic-packaged water.

Callen, which completed Porter's project, is also considering switching to vinegar and baking-soda based cleansers and now routinely hauls demolition and construction debris to a recycler.

Porter did a bit of research into green materials and processes, but quickly arrived at his own bottom line: "If it's beneficial to me, I'll do it," he says. "I don't want to put on natural paint and have to repaint every two years."

He found the perfect fit for the children's bath: gray mosaic tiles made of recycled glass.