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4 things you may not know about green home building



Scott, left, Jim and Kevin Frankel of the family-run firm Frankel Building Group in Houston.

FRANKEL BUILDING GROUP

"The most important thing that differentiates a green home is the amount of planning you put into it."

Scott Frankel
 Frankel Building Group

MORRIS MALANOFF PHOTO COURTESY OF THE FRANKEL GROUP

BY BARRETT GOLDSMITH
 HOUSTON BUSINESS JOURNAL

The house tucked away on Monica Street — right where Bunker Hill meets Piney Point — is elegant, with touches of the "natural" look warming an otherwise modern design. Yet as visitors take a closer look at the \$2.5 million home, it becomes clear that the natural plus futuristic theme is not just skin-deep.

Built by Houston-based custom builder Frankel Building Group, the home on Monica may well be a glimpse into the future. While still "on the grid," this green home is energy- and water-efficient, but does not skimp on technology. Its features include an energy management system controlled from a wall-mounted iPad.

"The most important thing that differentiates a green home is the amount of planning you put into it," says Scott Frankel, vice president of construction at the family-run firm. "It's about using the best and most sustainable materials and the best techniques and processes to make your home more environmentally friendly and more efficient."

1 'Green' homes cost \$10,000 to \$20,000 more at the outset.

Stephen Hann, president of Hann Builders, a Houston custom builder, says a million-dollar home could be made more green — efficient, low-impact and built from sustainable materials — with between \$10,000 and \$20,000 of extra investment. And that home will begin to pay for itself in energy savings between three and seven years down the road.

"Clients have become aware of what it costs to run and maintain a home," Hann says. "Five years ago, this stuff wasn't in the conversation, but now it's always part of the conversation. People are really looking at it in a big way."

That conversation doesn't have to include certificates or seals of approval, either. For many, it's about putting thought into a home before construction, or in some cases, retrofitting to reduce waste.

Hann says "greening" a home can be done with a few easy choices, such as springing for better windows and better insulation — open-cell foam, for example — or sealing an attic along with the main house. Homeowners can purchase air conditioners that provide the same level of comfort with

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a lot fewer watts or paints that don't emit harmful vapors — volatile organic compounds, or VOCs.

2 The green movement won't be phased out by the economy.

Some experts do believe the sluggish economy and weak housing market have dampened the enthusiasm for green homes.

James Benham is the owner of JB Technologies Inc. and operator of Smartbid.net, a site that digitizes the forest of paperwork involved in planning, constructing, selling and maintaining a home. Benham sees companies using some cost-cutting tools, such as his site, to stay afloat — but not too many are making a big splash in the green pool.

"That's totally understandable and probably advisable," Benham says. "In times of economic hardship, they're more concerned, rightly so, with getting people in the door than with a LEED certification. Economics always trumps everything."

But there's still a desire, he says.

"People still want to do it, so I think as the economy picks up you'll see green building really explode."

3 What is novel today will be standard tomorrow.

"I think," Benham adds, "we'll soon reach a point where it stops being 'green' building and just becomes building, just the way things are done."

The U.S. Green Building Council's Leadership in Efficiency and Environmental Design, or

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Stephen Hann
Hann Builders

LEED, program certifies structures or facilities at one of four levels based on their energy and water efficiency and overall environmental impact. The LEED standard is not as common in residential real estate as in commercial properties, but more home buyers are beginning to ask about it.

Lora-Marie Bernard, executive director of the U.S. Green Building Council for the Texas Gulf Coast, says the key to the standard is pushing the marketplace while remaining feasible.

"You want to make it something that requires a bit of thought and effort but is ultimately doable," Bernard says. "There should be products and services that you can find. You might not find it at your local hardware store — but it is available and you can find it. It challenges you to think about how important being green is to you."

The Greater Houston Builders Association, a local trade group of homebuilders,

launched its Green Built Gulf Coast program in June to replace an earlier program, the Green Building Initiative. The program is the first regional standard in the United States approved by the American National Standards Institute.

Adam Aschman, director of governmental affairs for the GHBA, says 18 builders have already registered for the program, and he expects more than 5,000 homes in the Houston area to be registered under the program by the end of 2011.

"Because this is a voluntary program, it's important to support our builders to encourage them to adopt the standard," Aschman says. "One of the things about Houston is we're very fortunate in that we can respond to market demands quickly. So whereas in some areas it can take years, here, we can really adopt new trends in just a few months."

4 Building green is not new, but it will raise the bar in the future.

Regardless of trends or shifts in public sentiments and no matter what standards and certifications a builder or homeowner adopts, green building will continue to be "built" on the same core principles that have always formed quality housing — durability, quality, affordability and smart design.

Alan Dossey, senior purchasing manager at the Houston branch of Miami-based Lennar Homes, says his company uses practices such as designing frames for low lumber use and engineering faucets and showerheads for minimal water waste. Lennar joined the Green Built Gulf Coast program in July, and Dossey says customers have already delivered their verdict.

"We've had a very positive response,"

Dossey says. "We provide each homeowner with a certificate that's address-specific. That demonstrates to the homeowner and their visitors that we don't just say we're green, we have it verified by a third party. We hope other homebuilders join this program, because it's really setting a new expectation for homeowners in the area." ■

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BUILDERS, REMODELERS ADOPTING NEW 'GREEN BUILT' PROGRAM

A number of area builders and remodelers have signed on to the Greater Houston Builders Association's Green Built Gulf Coast program, introduced this summer.

Companies that have adopted the GBGC program include: Beazer Homes, City Homes of Houston, Frankel Building Group, Highland Homes, Houston Habitat for Humanity, J. Patrick Homes, LBJ Construction LP, Highland Homes, Houston Habitat for Humanity, Mealy Company Builders, Morning Star Builders, Lennar Homes, Sandcastle Homes, Village Builders, Olympia Builders and W.E. Gilbert Co. Home Builders.

Under the program, there are a minimum number of features in the categories of energy, water and resource efficiency, lot and site development, indoor environmental quality and homeowner education. The builder attains more points through added features based on a scoring tool that assesses their level of compliance. Certification levels are designated as Bronze, Silver, Gold or Emerald standard.

Mike Dishberger, president of Sandcastle Homes, says his company recognized early that green building was "the way of the future."

"It addresses everything we believe is essential to providing a truly green-built home in this region of the country," Dishberger says of the program.

Builders and remodelers who have adopted the program have begun constructing Green Built Gulf Coast-certified homes in all of their communities.

"No one compares to Texas Mutual when it comes to the dividend program."

When we received our first workers' comp dividend check, we were excited, and over the last few years, we've continued to receive dividends. It's a great benefit, but if they discontinued the dividend program tomorrow, that wouldn't change my mind at all about doing business with Texas Mutual. With Texas Mutual, it's more than workers' comp insurance—they're like a business partner. If you're looking for a company that will help you keep your costs down and do it quickly and efficiently, then Texas Mutual Insurance Company is the company that'll do that."

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