Window into the New: Innovative Design Using Technology Shapes Grow Community on Bainbridge Island For Ultra-Cool Sustainable Living

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Sustainability is a concept sprouting up everywhere, defining much of what is associated with today's cutting edge culture. Shedding a stereotype of an idealistic grass-roots environmental movement, today the concept of sustainability is ultra-cool, hip and hot across age and gender groups, a driving force in sales and marketing, taking the lead in shaping modern design and influencing business—using state-of-the-art technology as a foremost ally.

Leading the way in the concept of attractive, affordable, practical solutions for sustainable living in the United States is the new Grow Community on Bainbridge Island, Washington taking root near the heart of the Island's commercial center in Winslow located only 35 minutes by ferry, directly west across from Seattle in Puget Sound.

As a designer, and University of California Davis Design Department alumni, I am always on the lookout for new trends—especially in environmental design. So, when I stumbled upon Grow Community being built this summer during my initial visit to the Island, I must say, it was love at first sight! Warm colors and an array of interesting visuals drew my friend and me inside. Other passerby's stopped in awe, generating a steady stream of pedestrian traffic with a positive vibe of satisfied intrigue…a collective sigh of relief was felt in the air of content excitement to see dreams and concepts actually being turned into a reality we could experience firsthand, and even purchase.

Modern, clean, sleek, light, bright and fun, I could not resist a tour! As I learned more about the project, I realized it truly is a gem; a viable, attractive, affordable, pedestrian oriented, multigenerational neighborhood developed to make it easy for residents to not only make the choice to be green, but to actively implement the core principles to follow through. The ultimate in satisfaction to those who really want to make a difference, with lifestyle choices that far from being a sacrifice, actually elevate ones quality of life in a welcoming upscale, tech-friendly-forward setting.

Designed by architect Jonathan Davis of Davis Studio Architecture + Design, Grow Community is a project by Asani. A Bainbridge real estate development company, Asani believes “sustainability is no longer an option.” Focused on green construction using clean energy-efficient designs, technologies and systems driven by innovation, creativity and practicality that ultimately support environmental quality, energy security and economic sustainability, “using advanced building technologies, materials and processes”, Asani aims to set new standards for urban developments and is eager to share knowledge with whomever wants to learn. “To save the planet we have to work together,” affirmed Marja Preston, senior director of the development.

Asked to “create something amazing” for the land acquisition with a goal of low density housing to make the best use of given space for the carbon footprint based on LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design developed by the U.S. Green Building Council) certification, Preston worked within the program’s narrow parameters for building.

However, Grow "will not be a LEED certified project." In Preston's words: "We made an intentional decision not to use LEED, but to use the One Planet guidelines to drive our goals toward Zero Carbon buildings. The One Planet framework focuses not just on buildings, as many certification systems do, but on carbon impacts from lifestyle. For instance, we also have a Zero Carbon from transportation goal, which is why the 5-Minute living, the Zero-Carbon car sh are and the bike share are a big focus for this project. To meet the City requirements the project will be certified as a Built Green 5-Star project, with third-party certification of the building." Grow is one of five endorsed One Planet Communities ® in the wor ld meeting the 10 Sustainability Principles established by BioReg ional, an award-winning social enterprise focused on real-life projects and business solutions for sustainable living.

So not surprisingly, with community gardens and shared transportation options and a 5-minute to town ideal transit time, Grow Community actually goes beyond the Leeds Program—according to Preston, “carbon impacts from our food and transportation lifestyle choices are 3 x’s what our housing choices are.” The idea is that we “can live urban but still feel connected to vegetation, gardens and nature.” Sustainable transportation is provided to residents with bike and car share. A low-emission Nissan Leaf Electric Car, powered by renewable energy using a 3.6kw solar array ("oversized" to make sure enough power will be produced for the car) on top of a small community building, is provided in the parking lot. Although only one is in use, developers are planning on adding more.

Preston is excited about the project and the number of homes already sold; surprised by the intense interest the project has generated “it’s the first of its kind and welcomed by the community, generating thoughtful conversation and pride.” The ‘help us grow your world’ purpose is to be non-invasive, inclusive, and inter-generational and community friendly. Taking a “big risk” in implementing the project, the enormous amount of research exploring energy-efficient building communities seems to have paid off.

In order to keep prices in check, and assure affordability, Preston set a goal of maintaining house prices before starting, keeping within a range of prices. Consisting of rental buildings and free standing houses for sale on fee simple lots, with 8 acres total, there are 5 acres remaining to build on in the site. Currently in the demo phase, Asani is listening to the community, residents and prospective buyer’s needs and wants, and will wait and see what the responses are before developing the remaining land.

As a community committed to reducing the planet’s carbon footprint, one of the main aspects of Grow are the net-zero energy homes. Ideally, solar panels covering the roofs will provide all the energy needs of the houses. The solar panels used (locally made in Washington) have the newest technology photovoltaic cells/micro inverters which are successful in cloudy/overcast climate and are more efficient, especially on East/West facing roofs. They can withstand typical snow for the region.

The solar panels are an option that can be added on later, when financially feasible for owners—and are not included in the base price. Asani wanted to create houses that people could afford to get residents initially into them---to build not only the greenest, but also to be affordable. Consumer loans and tax credits are available for the panels, and the price for them has gone way down. Ideally when installed, each house on its rooftop will have enough solar panels to self-sufficiently supply the whole unit.

Preston states that Grow Community is designed as a “pocket neighborhood “where there are informal opportunities to meet neighbors…interaction is not expected, but is a life-style choice….residents can choose whatever level of action they desire… such as car share or not…sustainable options are purely designed as choices that are available. Despite the relatively close social environment created with the freestanding structures, windows have been carefully placed so privacy is maintained while an abundance of natural light is let in.

Impressive light filled high ceilings in the homes are accompanied by a ton of insulation, that coupled with Ductless Mini-Split Heat Pump technology, an ERV Heat Recovery Ventilation System--- air exchanger---(as it moves air outside, it takes out the heat and puts it back into the air coming back into the house)--- and double wall systems that increase energy efficiency for zero-heat loss. As weather gets cold, homes that are air tight, such as at Grow, will stay considerably warmer, resulting in lower energy bills.

Innovation in interior technology applications abound. For example, in one model, buyers can take out a wall of cabinets on the second floor to make one large room instead of two; state of the art appliances that are super-efficient for water use reduction; compressed paper stone siding, storage sheds instead of garages, heated tile floor; and design solutions for the aging with enough space for access to all areas. Housing packages are the most energy-efficient and high-quality for the price, using local sustainable materials whenever possible including choices of smooth compressed paper counters, warm cork floors and rich fir flooring from the San Juan Islands, and cedar siding harvested 100 miles away.

Designers must keep up with changes in lifestyle demands over time, responding to new needs and wants of society. Often, visionary designs are unaffordable because the technology is just not “there”, but as technology catches up, prices go down. Now, designers are showing investors that sustainable designs are profitable—a worthwhile long-term investment, thanks to the affordable advances provided by technology.

Finally, take note: in the tech savvy model home I toured at Grow, an Apple iMac rested enticingly on the kitchen counter. With Apple shares rising and their corner of the smart phone market at ever increasing levels, look forward with a keen eye to the simplistic, clean aesthetic embodied in Apples signature user friendly designs. Grow Community is a glimpse into a window looking at the future, where concepts of sustainability are central elements in mainstream society and design.

“Our biggest challenge this new century is to take an idea that seems abstract – sustainable development – and turn it into a reality for all the world’s people.”

Former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, 2001

Grow Community Bainbridge is located at: 440 Grow Avenue NW, Bainbridge Island, Washington 98110

For more information visit:

www.growbainbridge.com or call 206-452-6755

http://www.usgbc.org/

http://www.bioregional.com/

http://www.asanillc.com/

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