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## SMALL DEVELOPER-BUILDER TEAM GOES GREEN

AND BUYERS ARE STARTING TO LISTEN

*Pat Terry*

While housing sales boomed, granite counter tops, oak floors and stainless appliances topped the priority list for most buyers. Many people planned to live in their new houses a few years, sell at a profit and move on.

Energy efficiency and quality construction didn't come up often in the sales conversation.

Maybe they should have.

An upscale, north side townhome development, for instance, continues addressing construction problems and energy inefficiencies some 15 years later. Last year, workers stripped off the upper-level brick façade, and re-insulated the leaking walls before reattaching the brick. Liens and lawsuits over leaking roofs took a toll on resales for more than one unit owner.

With rising gas prices and looming energy shortages, today's homebuyer is taking more interest in quality construction, observes Chuck Ginsberg, principal in Solfire Homes, Chicago. Although he's been building more energy-efficient, environmentally friendly homes with partner Dave Konopacki, Kono, Inc. construction, for the past eight years, buyers are increasingly eager to listen.



"When we walk a potential buyer through a house and point out the geothermal and solar options and talk about the advantages of cellulose insulation, buyers are often surprised—and very interested," says Ginsberg. "It usually isn't something they think to ask."

But the passionate environmentalist loves to bring it up, making him a real educator for greener living.

Together, Ginsberg and Konopacki have built and rehabbed about a dozen houses in the Chicagoland area, mostly priced from \$1-1.3 million. Their houses combine a variety of energy efficient features, including geothermal heating and cooling, radiant heat in the basement and solar electric panels on the roof. Solfire Homes also opts for energy saving through higher quality construction, using 2x6 exterior walls—which allows additional insulation and a sturdier house, 2x12 roof rafters blown with cellulose insulation and insulated exterior and interior foundation walls.

Another green feature is living greenery in the front yard.

At 4120 and 4138 N. Oakley, for instance, Ginsberg and Konopacki set the 2-story (a third level is the finished basement, two-thirds below street level) cottage-style houses back from the street and landscaped the front yards to blend with older homes in this North Center neighborhood. (Many of

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today's new single-family houses are built as vertical boxes, lot line to lot line, leaving little if any green or open space.) In the rear patio, porous pavers surrounded by a planted border, facilitate rainwater absorption.

The homes do, of course, offer the usual high-end amenities such as granite and marble counters, built-in appliances, oak floors, cherry fireplace mantels and wiring systems for everything from security cameras to iPod docks.

Ginsberg doesn't just build green, he lives it.

The small-scale developer retrofitted his own north side bungalow with solar panels eight years ago, drives a gas/electric hybrid and is currently planning "a truly energy efficient" home for his family utilizing renewable energy, radiant floor heat and a green roof.

"I've always believed that not using fossil fuels is important," says Ginsberg, "not only from an environmental standpoint but also from a political standpoint."

Although environmentally friendly or renewable energy systems cost more upfront, there is an eventual payback. "Today, it may be a 10-year payback on a geothermal heating and cooling system, but with rising gas prices, energy shortages and other changes ahead, that payback may come much sooner," say Ginsberg and Konopacki.

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