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Debunking the Green Building Myth

By Martin John Brown, E Magazine. Posted October 11, 2006.

Despite the new trend toward building 'green' McMansions, most of these homes are like hybrid SUVs: efficient only in comparison to other energy-guzzling behemoths.

It's home-show time in Portland, Oregon, and people are lining up to gawk at the "Oregon Dream," one of eight show homes in a yearly promotion organized by local builders. They shuffle on tile floors, agape at distant ceilings. Women linger by a convoluted tub with innumerable tempting jets; men look wistfully at a gas grill as massive and shiny as a firetruck.

Every home in the show is on the market, and "green" features are getting the hard sell. Native plants show up in the landscaping, scruffy beside freshly unrolled turf. An environmental non-profit, the Energy Trust of Oregon, is a major sponsor of the show. And the Oregon Dream is "Energy Star for Homes" certified -- meaning it uses 15 percent less energy than a standard "code" house of similar size. There's just one fly in the ointment: the size is gigantic. At 4,624 square feet, the house is like a hybrid SUV: efficient only in comparison to other behemoths. Despite the Energy Star label, the house has two full-size water heaters.

It's a perfect demonstration of the battle between two major trends in American housing. In the past few decades, houses have gotten greener, but they've gotten bigger too, leaving lingering questions: Is super-sized housing defeating conservation efforts? Can McMansions truly be green?

Houses are a major place to look for environmental gains. Besides consuming materials like lumber, the residential sector uses 21 percent of the nations energy, according to the Energy Information Administration (EIA). EIA reports indicate that over the past 20 or 30 years, energy-saving measures like efficient windows and refrigerators have become commonplace.

Meanwhile, homes have steadily grown from sedan- to Hummer-sized. According to the National Association of Home Builders, the average new single-family home was 983 square feet in 1950, 1,500 square feet in 1970, and 2,434 square feet in 2005. This occurred even as the average household shrunk from 3.4 to 2.6 people.

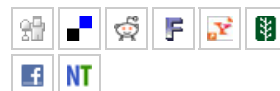
The net effect is troubling. Despite widespread use of efficient technology, a new study by scientists from the Department of Energy's Lawrence Berkeley Laboratory shows that from 1985 to 2002, total residential energy consumption per capita climbed eight percent, and residential consumption for the nation -- the figure most relevant to global effects like carbon dioxide (CO2) emissions -- climbed 32 percent.

While reasons for these increases may be complex, the Berkeley report singles out house size as a key factor. A 2005 report from the EIA comes to the same conclusions, showing that households with 3,000 or more square feet use 40 percent more energy than those with 2,000 to 2,400 square feet. In that context, it's fair to wonder if a home like the Oregon Dream deserves the green halo of an environmental certification.

The Energy Star label is appropriate, suggests Bob Stull, senior program manager for the Energy Trust of Oregon's Efficient New Homes Program. He says the labels key criterion is 15 percent improvement over a similar code-built house. Size by itself is not judged. "I'm not saying it's a good thing somebody is buying a 4,600-square-foot home," he says. "But telling people what size home to buy is not what our program is about."

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Size is a touchy subject in the exploding field of green building, suggests Jay Hall, lead consultant to the U.S. Green Building Councils pilot LEED for Homes program. LEED-H, as its called, is just one of dozens of American programs offering green building guidelines and certifications. Most score buildings across a broad range of environmental concerns, from indoor air quality to framing methods. But LEED-H is one of the bold few to take the subject of size head on.

Since bigger homes generally use more energy and materials, LEED-H's pilot scoring system rewards small homes and penalizes large ones. Bigger houses can accumulate credits in other areas -- for example, landscaping -- to get certified, but at some point the penalty gets too large to overcome. "We've received a huge amount of criticism for that," says Hall, "in particular from high-end custom home builders."

Fortunately not every builder thinks bigger is better. The Cottage Company, a developer in the Seattle area, is widely lauded for its "cottage communities" of finely detailed and certified-green small houses, some less than 1,000 square feet, most less than 2,000. Co-owner Linda Pruitt says her houses "live as big" as McMansions because they're better designed, with features like vaulted ceilings and abundant built-ins. "Its kind of like the design of a yacht," she says. The theme is quality of space, not quantity. Cottage Company's homes around expensive Puget Sound start at \$500,000.

Decidedly cheaper are the homes of people like Kathy Dolphin and Tim Johnson. Dolphin has shared a 600-square-foot San Diego house with a husband and daughter for decades; Johnson lives in a 200-square-foot house -- with three kids half the time -- on a Missouri prairie. The two are worlds apart, but have a lot in common.

They love the challenge of living small, making every restriction into a puzzle. They proudly cheat the electric company with solar panels. And they don't like debt. Dolphin paid her mortgage off early, and Johnson built his house for the cost of parts.

Just like this year's model homes, Johnson's tiny pad features DSL and a large LCD TV. And every day he wakes up to this year's must-have feature: a bedroom coffee station, guaranteed to generate jealous oohs and aahs.

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Martin John Brown is a writer and researcher specializing in historical and environmental topics. His work has appeared in Air & Space, Smithsonian, E: the Environmental Magazine, SAIL, Cat Fancy, American Spirit, and elsewhere.

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no way

Posted by: rsaxto on Oct 11, 2006 1:06 AM

Current rating: **Not yet rated** [1 = poor; 5 = excellent][\[Report this comment\]](#)

There is no way a very large size family house can be green for it guzzles too much materials, energy and labor in its construction and maintenance. We must face the fact that very rich people degenerate the environment more than lower income people. In America they are neither worth their huge incomes nor their huge houses. In a really decent society their incomes would be smaller, their houses would be smaller and their taxes would be larger. The Bushies have crippled the morality of America.

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» **RE: no way** Posted by: kittyboi

» **RE: no way** Posted by: rsaxto

» **RE: no way** Posted by: MartianBachelor

Questions

Posted by: anothername on Oct 11, 2006 4:44 AM

Current rating: **Not yet rated** [1 = poor; 5 = excellent][\[Report this comment\]](#)

I always have questions when I hear or read articles about green buildings. Questions such as:

- 1) What standards of measurement are being used (e.g., including bathroom and kitchen in measurement)?
- 2) Do windows open? (When I look at places to live, people regularly tell me where they live is quiet. Then I ask them how often they have their windows open and the answer usually is close to "never.")
- 3) Is recycling of household contents included in the green building concept? (what happens with the large-screen TV and bedroom coffee pot when they no longer work?)
- 4) Why are the smallest houses always out in the middle of a big open prairie or large cities where it is easy to step outside and have lots of room or options for movement? Does green building also mean building not only smaller but also where private transportation is not necessary?
- 5) Where is the push for green apartments, especially older apartments where the lower income workers and retirees live, where appliances waste electricity and money and windows do not keep out the winter cold or the summer heat forcing greater use of low-efficiency heat systems or air conditioners?

These are just some of the questions I never see asked or answered.

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» **RE: Questions** Posted by: saramarie

» **REcycle your landlady** Posted by: eddie torres

» **attempts at answers** Posted by: mjb

» **Experimental models from 70s and 80s** Posted by: Bic Pentameter

And what about HEMP for buildings ?!?!? Another useless big government bullshit talk article !!!

Posted by: NDnative on Oct 11, 2006 5:05 AM

Current rating: **Not yet rated** [1 = poor; 5 = excellent][\[Report this comment\]](#)

Put this article in the trash and fight for this solution instead !

Hemp for Houses

Oh I forgot, Altnet is in bed with Corporate America and the DEA ! Gawd, corporate liberals just like the corporate conservatives DISGUST me to the core !!!

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» **Altnet is either completely ignorant or too little too late on just about every issue !**

Posted by: SDres11

» **RE: And what about HEMP for buildings ?!?!? Another useless big government bullshit talk article !!!** Posted by: mjb

» **Thank you from the bottom of my heart for picking it up** Posted by: NDnative

» **RE: Thank you from the bottom of my heart for picking it up** Posted by: mjb

» **I have a few hemp clothing articles and a hemp wallet** Posted by: Bic Pentameter

» **Those are the shit, those materials!** Posted by: Bic Pentameter

but we need gigantic homes!

Posted by: antiapathy on Oct 11, 2006 6:34 AM

Current rating: **Not yet rated** [1 = poor; 5 = excellent][\[Report this comment\]](#)

where else are we going to store our gobs and gobs of stuff? The reasons homes are so big is 1)people buy too much crap and 2)they all need their own wing of the home to watch tv in. Environmentalism is fundamentally against our way of life. We are still under the collective delusion that America is a vast wilderness to be tamed by soccer moms in SUVs. Buying a home in the newest subdivision is akin to the pioneering days: look how far we have to caravan to get to walmart!

Our culture is based on consumerism and reality tv and Manifest Destiny. Why should we care if our homes cost a fortune to heat, and our subdivisions are miles away from our schools and jobs? We're Americans, dammit! We can live how we want to live, and nobody's gonna stop us.

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» **RE: but we need gigantic homes!** Posted by: redjenny

Wealthy people are like children

Posted by: jpinder on Oct 11, 2006 6:41 AM

Current rating: **Not yet rated** [1 = poor; 5 = excellent][\[Report this comment\]](#)

me wealthy want their big cars, homes and whatever else is useless. They assume they've worked so hard for their fortune. I know there's no way anyone is worth a six figure income worth of actual work, no way!

So to those who are enviromentally conscious, don't waste your time in this consumer driven society, it will get worse until our back is against the wall, then it will take a few hundred years to fix.

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» **Poor people are like children** Posted by: LtL

» **RE: Wealthy people are like children** Posted by: tlannin

If you want an energy independent home

Posted by: thoughtcriminal on Oct 11, 2006 9:01 AM

[Report this comment]

Current rating: **Not yet rated** [1 = poor; 5 = excellent]

You should take a look at the Home Power Journal

Unfortunately, you have to have financial resources to set up (for example) a large solar power array - anywhere from \$10,000 to \$50,000 for a complete job.

What is needed is sponsored loan programs that allow homeowners to make these upgrades. Then there's the issue of renters, since neither the landlord or the tenant has much incentive to make any real long-term improvements.

Of course, the coal and electric utility industry has been fighting any attempt at large expansion of solar and wind power - it would definitely hurt their profit margins. They prefer a captive monopolistic market.

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» **there's utility-based green power...** Posted by: mjb

» **Publicly-owned utilites do tend to have a better record in that area (sometimes)** Posted by: thoughtcriminal

» **RE: Publicly-owned utilites do tend to have a better record in that area (sometimes)** Posted by: mjb

Yes but its better than the alternative

Posted by: albrechtkrausse on Oct 11, 2006 9:03 AM

[Report this comment]

Current rating: **Not yet rated** [1 = poor; 5 = excellent]

of large homes without ANY 'green' efficiencies. Of course, in the ideal socialised world we would all love in concrete apartment complexes build to government spec and only shop at one store located on the same street. Unfortunately, people tend to like freedom, space, and privacy.

What's interesting is there are so many good ideas from the past on how to build houses so that they are more efficient but, like most things, America strives for the cheapest/quickest method of building which means this wood-framed housing market. However this was not always the case.

-Thicker walls. Use stone.

-Window that can open (look at the windows next time you're in Holland or Germany. Very ingeneous design so that the window can be opened at the top, swing all the way out, or open at the bottom.)

-Design windows with regard to suns location and for cross-breezes

-bring back transom over doors (to allow circulation if door is closed).

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» **RE: Yes but its better than the alternative** Posted by: kittyinboi

» **RE: Yes but its better than the alternative** Posted by: redjenny

One other thing....

Posted by: thoughtcriminal on Oct 11, 2006 9:16 AM

[Report this comment]

Current rating: **Not yet rated** [1 = poor; 5 = excellent]

The goal of many renewable energy providers is first to break the media silence on renewable and alternative energies.

Take the Tesla AC roadster. This car is ridiculously expensive, (100K) but it is entirely powered by an electric motor. Unlike the clunky little electric boxes of yesterday, this is a high sports car that does 0-60 in 4 seconds and is powered by a large bank of cell phone-type batteries, and has a range of 250 miles.

This car has gotten positive coverage by mainstream media (San Jose Mercury Car Report). People can no longer say that a decent electric car doesn't exist.

Also, half the imported oil in California comes directly from the MidEast. California pays more for gas than the rest of the country - it's a bloody rip-off on all fronts.

The next step, which hopefully will come soon, is to take this expensive vehicle and make an economy model that is available to ordinary American citizens. Other technological developments are possible, like putting a photovoltaic solar skin on the car.

The point is that it's worth spending a lot of money to make a good demonstration project that helps get the US off of foreign oil. Attacking such projects seems wrong-headed - rather, figure out how the bottom teir of the US - renters who might never be able to afford a home - can have access to renewable energy, organic food, clean air and clean water.

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» **Arnold sided with BIG OIL by VETOING the legalization of HEMP !!!** Posted by: SDres11

» **What a bummer, huh?** Posted by: thoughtcriminal

» **Pombo uber alles** Posted by: eddie torres

NOT MENTIONED: Passive solar design and straw bale construction

Posted by: johndoraemi on Oct 11, 2006 1:02 PM

[Report this comment]

Current rating: **Not yet rated** [1 = poor; 5 = excellent]

Passive solar design can increase thermal performance and save loads of energy. The south face should be long and include lots of windows. There need to be proper overhangs calculated to let in the most light/AND FREE HEAT in the winter and block it out in summer.

Most developments do not care a damn about the position of the sun, and simply face houses according to streets, which are squeezed in for maximum usage of the acreage. These houses are fundamentally designed to ignore the solar characteristics.

Secondly, straw bale construction offers tremendous advantage over stick built. The insulating factor is several times greater, no matter how much fiberglass (polluting industry) insulation you stuff in here.

In California, they burn tons of rice straw because they don't know what else to do with it. It should be turned into the next generation of efficient housing.

John Doraemi publishes Crimes of the State Blog.

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» **RE: NOT MENTIONED: a lot of stuff** Posted by: mjb

» **RE: NOT MENTIONED: a lot of stuff** Posted by: albrechtkrausse

» **RE: NOT MENTIONED: a lot of stuff** Posted by: HeroesAll

» **RE: NOT MENTIONED: a lot of stuff** Posted by: albrechtkrausse

» **RE: NOT MENTIONED: a lot of stuff** Posted by: HeroesAll

It depends.

Posted by: dbenhur on Oct 11, 2006 6:50 PM

[Report this comment]

Current rating: **Not yet rated** [1 = poor; 5 = excellent]

Depends on just how "green" your design is.

Amory Lovins' Rocky Mountain Institute headquarters is a show case of smart passive solar design. This 4000 ft² building has **no furnace or air conditioning** yet remains comfortable year round despite high altitude and severe winter weather.

RMI calculates that the extra expense to achieve this level of efficiency was recovered in saved energy expense within the first five years of operation (not even considering the saved capital equipment cost and maintenance from having no furnace/conditioner).

Of course, large structures will always consume more raw materials; but wise material choices can largely offset that as well.

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katherine salant, syndicated columnist

Posted by: k salant on Oct 11, 2006 7:55 PM

[Report this comment]

Current rating: **Not yet rated** [1 = poor; 5 = excellent]

While big houses consume more energy to heat and cool than smaller ones, assuming that the level of energy efficiency is the same, heating and cooling only account for about 41 percent of total household energy use, on average. The other 59 percent is consumed by lighting, appliances, and the myriad of doodads and electrical equipment that most households in the US possess. If we are seriously going to ratchet down household energy use, size is only one issue.

Big houses consume more resources to build, but long term, the bigger issue for both small and big houses is their total annual energy consumption.

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» **RE: katherine salant, syndicated columnist** Posted by: mjb

Why do people want McMansions?

Posted by: Logic's Edge on Oct 11, 2006 8:49 PM

[Report this comment]

Current rating: **Not yet rated** [1 = poor; 5 = excellent]

Do they really need those cavernous kitchens to microwave a pizza pocket? Or huge vaults to sit in a chair and watch the "news" on TV?

It's just all about status, then. "See what I can afford. Oh, and I don't have to feel guilty about the profligate waste because it's Greenstar!"

If you have the money, why not buy a piece of land, find a blueprint you really like and build a modest, beautifully-designed home that fits the lot well instead of requiring the land to be buzzcaped to sprout largey indistinguishable behemoths.

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Sorry MJB

Posted by: eddie torres on Oct 11, 2006 9:51 PM

[Report this comment]

Current rating: **Not yet rated** [1 = poor; 5 = excellent]

Not buying your argument.

Next time, please answer:

Board feet of raw lumber (construction grade) required to rebuild every energy inefficient residential dwelling in US?

Tons of glass needed to double pane every existing single pane window in US?

Tons of metal needed for nails, screws, trusses, braces, anchor bolts, straps, etc to rebuild every energy inefficient residential dwelling in US?

Tons of asphalt, tar, plastics, and other petroleum products to rebuild every energy inefficient residential dwelling in US?

Barrels of oil used in transportation, fabrication, and assembly to rebuild every energy inefficient residential dwelling in US?

Geographic source of alternatives to all of above?

Names of banks, financial institutions, and other underwriters that will extend credit and other services to a nation of debtors?

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» **RE: Sorry MJB** Posted by: mjb

» **RE: Sorry MJB** Posted by: HeroesAll

» **Love might lead to offspring** Posted by: eddie torres

Dan Peper

Posted by: Dan Peper on Oct 12, 2006 5:53 AM

[Report this comment]

Current rating: **Not yet rated** [1 = poor; 5 = excellent]

As a green home builder I can relate to the above story. What passes as "green" building is pathetic in most instances. My definition of "Green" would have five basic aspects. Energy efficient in both its use and construction. Natural materials. Local materials as much as possible. A liveable indoor environment, without use of mechanical devices. When the home has been well used (in a few hundred years) it will bio-degrade and could be used as a garden spot. A related story, I learned of a Green Certification offered by the state and some of the utility companies. I down loaded their criteria and was told a home would need to score 140 to qualify. I very conservatively went through the criteria on one of my homes. Most of the way through I realized I would never make 140. Maybe 125-130. I contacted the certifiers and was told to qualify was 40 not 140. So much for Green Certification. Ha! Ha!

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» **RE: Dan Peper** Posted by: mjb

4,000 square foot "green" house is a contradiction in terms

Posted by: mark bartos on Oct 14, 2006 10:37 AM

[Report this comment]

Current rating: **Not yet rated** [1 = poor; 5 = excellent]

As an Architect I've been saying this for years: The most green thing that someone can do is to live in a house that already exists and that is sized properly to the family. It is amazing how many people want to buy their way in to heaven by building a 4,000 sf "green" house. This is just a contradiction in terms.

A house should be considered green not on energy per sf but by energy per occupant. Both yearly energy use and embedded energy. 1,000 sf is easily enough space for 4 people in the U.S.A. : Any rating system should simply start with a SF / Occupant limitation as a threshold to cross before any other consideration of "green".

Land itself is a precious non-renewable resource.

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» **square footage standard?** Posted by: mjb

» **RE: square footage standard?** Posted by: mark bartos

Progressive Democrats Support Sustainable Living

Posted by: Eli Mann on Oct 16, 2006 2:13 PM

[Report this comment]

Current rating: **Not yet rated** [1 = poor; 5 = excellent]

It never ceases to amaze me - how so many people in our government neglect the importance of sustainability. It is refreshing to see that sustainable living - especially with regards to our energy consumption - is finally getting to the front of important issues in the American political discourse.

One of the most awesome groups out there making a difference on this issue is the 21st Century Democrats, who endorse and support both financially and logistically (on the ground) progressive democratic candidates that hold sustainability as one of their strongest values. People like Diane Farrell (D, CT-04), Jim Martin - (D, GA-Lt. Gov.), Chris Murphy (D, CT-05), Rebecca Otto (D, MN-St. Auditor), Ted Strickland (D, OH-Gov.), Jon Tester (D, MT-Senator) and many more, who are all running for public office in order to oust Republican candidates that value money and excess over our future - a future we only get one chance to build right, and build well. If you want a sustainable future, help work for it this November with the Democrats of the 21st Century!

21st Century Democrats Website

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Green McMansions: Eco-footprint issue

Posted by: tlannin on Oct 17, 2006 2:27 PM

[Report this comment]

Current rating: **Not yet rated** [1 = poor; 5 = excellent]

As someone who has met with and communicated regularly with LEED-certified architects and US Green Building Council contractors, I can say that most see this as a "design" issue rather than a moral one. For example, building a 4,000+ square foot mountain eco-house would be a very tempting project, especially if the dwelling uses vertical space intelligently and integrates the house into the natural beauty of the land with minimal impact. Architects can design residences so that owners produce zero carbon even to the point of selling energy back to utility companies after a while. The initial upfront costs are high, but the long-term payback is pretty good.

Most McMansions--green or otherwise--are pretty ghastly, though. They're an affront to the "less is more" philosophy underpinning eco-development, but big house lust pervades our culture.

In places such as Charlotte, North Carolina, we're seeing 1,000-2,000 square foot ranches being leveled and replaced with much larger homes. Some are pretty attractive but hardly any are technically sustainable. The fact is, most builders haven't a clue about green design principles. They think they're too costly, either to the consumer or themselves. That doesn't mean builders don't care, they just aren't aware of the long-term economic and environmental gains of sustainable building. Basically it gets down to changing consumer tastes and creating higher awareness, which is a perennial challenge.

Research indicates that the demographic wanting to build green structures of any kind are upper-middle class economically. That should come as no surprise. Smart developers know that higher density means higher profits, so they go after the affluent. The goal is to convince them and their

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The interest in green McMansions won't subside until public opinion makes them unsexy, and right now green is very sexy.

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