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Transforming Green Design Into Luxury

BY HAROLD SIMANSKY

The decision to build green can come from many sources. Some may see it as a responsibility we should all undertake. Others may be attracted by the financial opportunities that exist in tapping this new consumer trend. Still others may be inspired by former Vice President Al Gore and his fellow celebrity boosters of environmentalism.



Locally, the decision to go green when building 99 Winchester St., a five-unit luxury residential property that will be Brookline,

Mass.' first LEED-certified condominium development, was more slowly made and in many ways less deliberate.

The top priority was creating a building of the highest quality and luxury. Originally, green elements were incorporated only to ensure that the building was a healthy one, though not necessarily environmentally friendly. But when it became clear that environmental friendliness would actually ensure healthiness and that a healthy home dovetailed nicely with a green approach, 99 Winchester became green in the extreme.

In many ways, the project was created as a reaction to the two-bedroom, two-bathroom shoeboxes that have begun to fill Brookline and many other local urban centers. There was a large, unmet need for spacious units (three and four bedrooms) of exceptional design and custom-home quality. Jeremiah Eck of Eck MacNeely Architects was chosen as the architect for the project. The builder was Grant Rhode of



A five-unit luxury residential property at 99 Winchester St. will be the first LEED-certified condominium development in Brookline, Mass.

GF Rhode Construction. The award-winning professionals are well-known in the world of custom home-building, and 99 Winchester was their first condo undertaking together.

The project began in November 2006 with the dramatic first step of relocating an 1890 Queen Anne Victorian home that would be the centerpiece of the new development. The decision to move it was made for the most pragmatic of reasons: Only by preserving the existing structure could zoning approval for the project be obtained. Also, moving the house made room for a 9,500-square-foot addition that would make the

project economically sound.

Like many of the decisions made throughout the project, moving the house rather than demolishing it turned out to be fundamentally green. An existing structure was recycled and restored, and most of its gutted interior was donated rather than sent to a landfill. It made perfect economic and environmental sense.

As 99 Winchester progressed, a pattern was emerging: Good decisions made for quality and design reasons were positive from an environmental perspective. Good design led to large, south-facing windows. A

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healthy home required low-VOC adhesives and paints and non-formaldehyde plywood. A quality build meant dense-pack cellulose insulation and others.

Even the greenest aspect of the project had its genesis in more mundane decisions. As originally envisioned, the HVAC system was a fairly standard fossil fuel-based system. But when it became clear that such a system, with its 11 rumbling condensers, would be too noisy to pass zoning muster, there was no choice but to search for an alternative. The solution was a geothermal HVAC that uses two 1,200-foot wells and taps the ambient heat in the earth to both heat and cool the building.

From an environmental and cost perspective, geothermal is fantastic. No fossil fuels are used and the cost to run the system is a fraction of conventional systems. The only downside is the upfront costs – in this case, spending an additional, unanticipated \$100,000.

With each succeeding phase, a momentum began that had the project team riding a green wave. Jack Mackin of F.D. Sterritt Lumber Co. took charge of the team's education, lobbying easy questions that yielded environmentally friendly decisions. But the

biggest question that had to be addressed was this: Did we want to take the process to the extreme by pursuing LEED certification? It was at that point that the project developer balked. Having never intended 99 Winchester to be a green project, he didn't feel the need to go that extra step. Beyond that, there were concerns about the cost and effort required for LEED certification.

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The architect and general contractor were already stretched, so was it reasonable to ask them to do the large amounts of paperwork that LEED requires? Similarly, up to that point, going green was costing only up to 2 percent more on a few limited items. That didn't require a lot of thought, particularly if those overages could be shoehorned into existing budget lines. Conversely, LEED certification would require a completely new line item of unknown size – something the bank was likely to balk at. So initially, the answer was no.

But seeing how far consumer expectations had come regarding the environment changed the developer's mind. LEED certification started looking like the only way to go. It allows a project team to say that while other buildings may claim to be environmentally sound, they are the only ones who can actually prove it.

The certification process, if not quite as onerous as was feared, was intensive and expensive. Much of the complication came from the fact that they had waited so long. The project was more than half done before Conservation Services Group was called in to facilitate the process.

Was going green worth it? Economically, the answer is a qualified yes. The rub is that 99 Winchester was already a quality project with a generous budget supported by a high price point. Making environmental choices increased construction costs by about 2 percent, excluding the geothermal. For a different project, a different budget and a different price point, pursuing LEED certification might not have been as cost-effective.

But for this project, on every dimension, it was worth it. By going geothermal and using eco-friendly building materials, some wonderful homes that are healthy and energy-efficient were created. ■

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