

GREEN STARS

For 11 straight years the crew at ALLEN ASSOCIATES have taken home the prize for best green builder in Santa Barbara

BY LAURANCE HAUBEN

Dennis Allen, founder and president of Allen Associates, has been a builder for thirty four years. He has been a “green builder” for exactly as long. “Green” may be the buzz word *du jour*, but to Allen it is just the best way to build, and he is passionately committed to it. “Green building is basically smart building,” Allen says. “I just call it good building practice. Green building considers how the people and the place are going to live together. It is a holistic approach to building, the opposite of putting in a road and plopping a house on a lot.”

Many of us realize that between the stark realities of climate change and finite energy supplies, we need to rethink not only how we build our homes, but how we structure our communities. But what does it mean on a practical level, beyond switching light bulbs and buying energy-star appliances?

Allen started pondering these questions decades ago. “I was driving to Santa Barbara from San Francisco in 1973,” he recalls. “It was in the middle of the gas embargo. I pulled into a gas station, and had to wait two hours to get gas. When my turn finally came, I could only get a half tank. I really didn’t know if I would make it all the way down here. This got me thinking that we had to start doing things differently, be smarter about how we used energy.”

“I built my first passive solar house in 1976. Passive solar is nothing new. The Anasazi did it thousands of years ago. You orient the main side of the house to the South, South-East, you plan for how cooling breezes will move through the house, you build a reflective roof, you insulate really well, you use different glazing on the windows depending on which side of the house they are, you design a trellis with deciduous vines to provide shade in summer but let light in during the winter months. You use nature to work for you.”

Allen got national attention in 1984 when his company built the Gildea Center, long the home of the Community Environmental Center. Designed with multiple functions in mind, the building served as a small residential campus, a demonstration facility, seminar space, and office building.

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"The building was state of the art," Allen recalls. "It was the first building in Santa Barbara County to feature a photo-voltaic system. We were thinking about renewable energy, recycling, low maintenance, low water use, rain water collection, non-toxic materials, how to interact with our environment in sustainable ways."

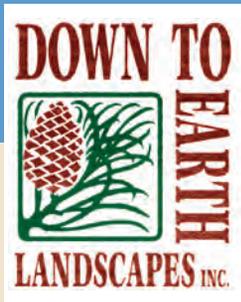
As the past year has made painfully clear, wildfires are a major environmental hazard in our region. Considering this when designing a house is essential, Allen says. "Fires are part of the local ecology. We need to build in ways that take this into account. We are finding that we can build structures and space around them that will not burn. Here again, green building and smart building converge."

Does green building cost more? "Good design does not cost more," Allen replies. "What makes most sense from a budget standpoint is to decide from the outset that you are going this way, so that all talent is brought to bear on the concept in a "design charette" that leads to cost savings. Some green building materials are actually less expensive than traditional ones. For example, there are sidings made of cement and waste products that are more durable than wood, fire-resistant, and cost half the price of wood. Other things, like on-demand water heaters, cost more to purchase, but pay off in decreased power bills over time. You also need to think about how big a house you really need. Bigger is not always better or more comfortable. Even banks are coming to realize that green building makes sense, and are giving advantageous green mortgages."

Perhaps what is most impressive about Allen Associates, given how successful the firm has been, is how accessible it feels, how easy Allen and his team are to talk to. With sixty five employees and seven associates who act as overseers on projects, each client gets individual attention, whether the job is a major condominium development, a custom dream home, a prefab guest house, or a small remodel on a tight budget.

"Building a house for someone is a relationship, a lifetime relationship. You have to have great communication skills, be willing to listen. We have established a track record of respect for the environment, reliability, craftsmanship, and value. Our firm also offers a guarantee of financial stability, something clients appreciate in these uncertain times," Allen says. "Our friends are the people we build for. We don't have to cross the street when we run into them downtown. We can walk around with our head held high."

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