

There are a number of home-builders who are now making sustainable building practices part of their business model. While some are satisfied with employing these practices with only a cursory description of what they mean to their clients, others take it a step further. "It's about educating the client," says John Groothius, VP of Lifestyle Homes Elements initiative. And that point, pardon the pun, is hammered home when you walk into the Lifestyle Homes Elements Eco Home Interpretive Centre in the Okotoks' community of Drake Landing.

Purported to be the first of its kind in Canada, the Interpretive Centre is described in the Lifestyle Homes media release as "constructed to educate home buyers on environmentally sustainable home building practices [...], and] its exhibits explain the features and environmental benefits of everything from high-tech geothermal and solar thermal systems, to alternative insulation and clay wall coverings."

The centre, which opened to the public on September 27, is affixed to the front of two of the Elements homes: Earth and Air. These two are half of what the Elements enterprise represents. The other two are Water and Energy.

From the Douglas fir flooring salvaged from a Washington fishery and the carpet made from recycled pop bottles to the hand picked stones that are built into the flooring of the entrance way and the VOC (volatile organic compounds) free marmoleum flooring in the laundry room, everything under foot in the Earth home is sourced out to be completely sustainable. "The focus here is on recycling, reclamation, and sustainability," says Robin Moss, our guide and one of the co-owners of Just for You Design and Décor.

As the floors give way to walls we see the the builder's principles continue. "The paint on these walls is completely recycled," says Moss as she points to the neutral coloured walls. "And the clay feature walls give off negative ions, which neutralize the positive ions given off by electronic equipment making you feel better." Another thing that Elements is doing with the Interpretive Centre is to cut holes into the walls and ceilings so you can see the insulation that goes into them. "It's recycled news print treated so it doesn't clump and slip away," says Groothius. Indeed the media fact sheet states it's "80 percent recycled newsprint [...] treated with non-toxic borate compounds to resist fire, insects, and mould."

Some of the other features of the Earth house are kitchen counter tops made of pressed paper (incredibly resilient and a sight to behold), energy efficient light fixtures, living walls, and an innovative heat recovery system that works in conjunction with, as the media release states with "exiting drain water to reduce fuel consumption."

The next element being focused upon is Air. One of the first things you notice as you enter each house is the noticeable lack of odor that usually accompanies a new home, and this seems to be especially the case with the Air initiative. There was no smell of glue, paint or any other chemicals, whatsoever. "Improved air quality is a priority for Lifestyle Homes," says the Media release. Not only is all of the paint in the home low VOC, but so is all of the linoleum used throughout. As the release states, "UV light treatment in the ductwork [to] kill bacteria, a built-in HEPA filter in the ventilation system and a steam humidifier [for maintaining] optimum moisture level" are a few of the other features being offered in this initiative. The flooring includes long panels of tile that suggest fewer places for dust to hide; therefore easier to clean, as well as anti-fungal cedar flooring in the master bedroom's shower. The Air home is about air quality, and as Groothius says, "the common focus has been on creating a tight envelope, but now it's also about dealing with the air inside," and the air exchange in this home is far and away superior to a traditional home.

The other two initiatives not seen on the tour were the Water and the Energy homes. The Water initiative offers everything from insulated water lines, dual flush toilets, re-circulated hot water, and tap timers to a more thorough undertaking involving what the release says is a "complete grey water system that reuses many sources of household water." The Energy program's mandate is to conserve, well . . . energy. This includes a high efficiency furnace and hot water tank. Some of the more costly initiatives would include geothermal heating and cooling systems and a solar thermal

hot water system.

A few things all of the initiatives have in common are, according to the release, “Energy Star windows, programmable thermostats, low flow plumbing fixtures, insulated water lines and vacuum ductwork.” And for the truly motivated home owner each home is also roughed in for solar thermal heating, wind power, and grey water systems.

All Lifestyle Homes can be built incorporating any of the features being presented by any of the Elements initiatives for the cost of what the media release says is “two to 14 per cent” above the price of what a Lifestyle Home is currently being sold at. And, in the end, this doesn't seem to be an outrageous figure when talking about the effect that this sort of education would have on the environment of the community in general, and home owner specifically.

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