

# Eco-minded?

## Try puddle test

How much change is acceptable in order to have environmentally sustainable buildings?



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**T**here is a rainwater puddle a couple of inches deep behind your garage in the back alley when it rains heavily. It disappears an hour or two after the heavy rains have ceased. How willing are you to accept this condition?

How about drought-tolerant plants in the flower beds around your home and drip-feeding watering systems instead of sprinklers? Or low-flow shower heads in your bathrooms?

If you live in a condominium building, are you willing to have a common compost box near your ground-floor apartment? And are you willing to walk into an underground parking garage where the lights come on only as motion sensors detect your movements?

These are some of the initiatives that can be part of a more environmentally sustainable way of building homes and operating buildings.

They also represent a departure from the way we build and live in homes today. How much of a departure are you willing to accept?

The current debate in the development community about whether buyers are prepared to pay more for a home that is built using techniques and materials that are healthier and more respectful of the environment is important and timely.

Many regulatory authorities, including a number of local municipalities, are considering mandatory green building standards.

The extra cost of these technologies is another consideration. Many are pondering how tolerant homeowners would be to some of the small sacrifices that

need to be made to build homes that are more environmentally friendly.

It appears most people are not all that tolerant. The rainwater puddle example is a good one. I am told that public works departments across the Lower Mainland daily receive complaints from residents about concerns that I might consider trivial, like rainwater puddles or overhanging tree branches, but obviously others consider these concerns important.

Liability is another big concern. Many of the new green building techniques are new and untested. There is risk associated with their failure.

Unfortunately, as our modern society becomes increasingly more litigious, where we expect someone else to be responsible for our health and safety, many developers and municipalities are becoming increasingly concerned with the liabilities they might be exposed to with the potential failure of untested building systems.

What this all points to is the fact that it is going to take a major shift in public attitudes and expectations before we're going to see huge breakthrough gains in setting new standards for more sustainable urban development and more environmentally friendly buildings.

Advocates of green building and sustainable development talk today about "picking the low-hanging fruit." They admit that the challenge of moving an entire consumer mindset is far too daunting a task. Better to focus on small gains, where the departure from the status quo goes largely unnoticed by the consumer and where the risks, both financial and legal, can be mitigated.

We like to think that we live in a special place in this little corner of the globe, where our natural setting promotes a healthier and more sustainable approach to living. Perhaps the rainwater puddle test is a good measure about how sincere we are about turning rhetoric into action.

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