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Benefits of sustainability must spread to all

By RICO QUIRINDONGO

The next wave of sustainable building goes beyond building “green,” and extends to the social ramifications of sustainability.

Until now, those touting green building have focused on the physical efforts they can incorporate to preserve the environment, save energy, reduce waste and conserve natural resources. Most green and sustainable building features have gone to those that can afford them — well-off individuals and wealthy corporations.

A small but growing number of facility owners, cities, developers, investors and members of the building industry are beginning to champion “social sustainability.” Social sustainability is where ALL people get to participate in energy savings and green economic opportunities, particularly those who can least afford them but who stand to benefit from them the most.

For many who have worked in low-income communities for decades, combining green building applications with a concern for economic and social equity is a logical next step.

Most members of underserved populations are not considered environmental activists, and until recently, these groups were excluded from participation in green design and construction. Sustainable design has not been widely embraced by low-income communities because they perceive that it is more expensive and that the recognized measure of success, LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certification, is difficult to achieve.

For many groups, making their home or business green and energy efficient has been too costly. Financially strapped nonprofit agencies, for example,

have not been able to justify the cost of adding energy-saving features and using environmentally friendly materials when they do not have enough funds to serve their clients.

As socially conscious architects, engineers and builders, we need to advance the Green For All cause and educate communities about the benefits of green projects — they are affordable, easy to maintain, save money, improve people’s health and create green-collar jobs. We need to recognize the challenges these groups face and be creative in our approach in order to bring these opportunities to people who have the greatest need.

The Seattle Housing Authority and The Asian Counseling & Referral Service, also known as ACRS, have succeeded in incorporating green building features and materials into new facilities, which are benefitting their clients, and in ACRS’ case, their employees, too.

Architects designed ACRS’ new building carefully so that the Seattle nonprofit could have a highly functional building, one that was energy efficient and that helped minimize future maintenance costs. Natural light floods the building, lightening the mood and relieving the stress of ACRS employees and clients, who often work in challenging situations.

The Seattle Housing Authority conducts energy and mechanical systems audits on many of the 22 low-income high rises the agency is renovating as part of its homeWorks Program. The agency is replacing roofs, windows, mechanical and plumbing systems, extending the life of the aging buildings and improving residents’ lives.

Thanks to federal stimulus money, SHA is stepping up its green building efforts and may install solar hot water tanks to augment existing systems and add solar electricity where possible and feasible, in addition to other sustainable efforts.

Resource inefficiencies are most costly to those who can least afford it. Eco-friendly renovations of existing low-income housing stock are an affordable way to upgrade the living environment of residents, conserve our natural resources, reduce utility costs and extend the useful life of these properties.

Architects, engineers and builders have an important role to play in social sustainability, and we need to think creatively about how we can bring affordable green buildings to all, especially those who can benefit from them the most.

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