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Florida House effect

Aim of Florida House is to spark interest in living 'green'

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It stands alone, does the Florida House, an example of -- and anthem to -- building "green," efficient and sustainable buildings in the Sunshine State's rugged clime.

It stands alone on a remote stretch of the Sarasota County Technical Institute campus, surrounded only by plants and mulch and gardens suitable for hot, humid weather. And it stands alone, an environmentally friendly home erected nearly 12 years back, well before the concept hit the big time.

Well, it stands alone, aside from the look-alike it spawned in Ellenton.

Or the twin ones erected on an Ocala ranch -- one for the property owner and the other, connected by garage, for his in-laws.

Or the model home patterned after it in Utah. Or the one in Louisiana. Or, soon, one in Englewood.

Maybe, after all, the Florida House Learning Center isn't all that alone. Not any longer, that is.

And that's a good thing.

"Our mission is not just to educate our citizens about green buildings," explained Betty Alpaugh, program coordinator at the 4600 Beneva Road center. "Our mission is actually to change people's behaviors so that they know how to live sustainably.

"People can walk around in here and say, 'Isn't that nice.' But if they walk out and don't do anything different in their lives, we've failed."

To be sure, people have been doing things differently since the Florida House opened its doors to the public April 21, 1994 -- suitably, Earth Day -- tweaking their homes and habits after the ideas of the model center.

And more and more, people go to extremes.

Like Lee and Carol Ann Breyer did with their house.

Their whole house, that is.

"We modeled it on the Florida House," Carol Ann said of the couple's 505 Palm Ave. home in Ellenton. "We built it to look just like the Florida House."

More than that, they built their home to function just like the environmental showcase, which mixes throwback architecture and modern-day technology to meld with the harsh Florida climate rather than overpower it.

The throwback part leans heavily on Florida Cracker-style homes, gaining cooling efficiency by using sweeping porches that shade harsh sunlight from much of the structure, a high ceiling with a cupola to exhaust rising hot air, and plenty of doors and windows for cross-breezes.

But the model house also takes full advantage of the latest advances, employing energy-saving fluorescent bulbs, tankless water heaters, a high-efficiency heating and cooling system, painted-on insulation, recycled construction materials, and on and on and on.

The unusual mix of techniques helps the house -- with 1,557 square feet under air conditioning and an additional 820 square feet of screened porches -- fills the green bill.

And fill the bill for the Breyers.

The couple were winding down their working days in Tallahassee in the mid-1990s, contemplating the retirement ahead and looking for a home for the coming years.

Carol Ann, then working on special needs employment programs with the Florida Department of Education, had crossed paths with Michael Holsinger, then the director of the Sarasota County Extension Service. Holsinger, a driving force behind the Florida House, began talking it up.

It didn't take much talking.

"We believe so strongly in the concept that the Florida House demonstrates," said Carol Ann Breyer. "It's the whole concept of being environmentally correct and sustainable.

"Mike said in an interview once, 'This is not a house for the future; this is a house for now,' and we really believe that."

But it's not truly a "green" house, at least not by the widely accepted definition devised by the private U.S. Green Building Council. Then again, that council's set of Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design standards came out six years after the Florida House and targeted commercial structures.

And the group doesn't plan to have a LEED-for-homes definition until 2007.

"You can't really compare us to LEED," said Kathie Balchin, administrative coordinator at the learning center. "It's like mixing apples and oranges."

Still, the Breyers saw value in the Florida House. Saw how it cozied up to the environment rather than battled it. Saw how it worked to conserve resources with water-saving features and landscaping. Saw how it emphasized the use of locally produced materials.

So, the couple got copies of the Florida House floor plan -- readily available at the center for anyone interested -- and turned to an architect for minor modifications.

Really minor modifications, that is; chiefly, adding some 700 square feet to the air-conditioned floor space and 500 square feet to the porches.

Much of the rest, they retained. The basic room layout. The cupola and high ceilings. Lots of doors and windows to catch river-cooled breezes. Wide, screened porches. Solar panels for heating water. Recycled building materials. Energy-saving appliances and fixtures.

"Anyone could really build one," Carol Ann said. "It isn't, at all, brain surgery and it's not architectural gymnastics. Essentially, the design is there."

They bought a tract fronting the Manatee River and in 2000 moved to the area

to oversee the project.

Two years later, they were moving into their house.

Their Florida House, that is.

"I'll never forget that one day we drove down the street and looked up, and I thought, 'Oh, my God, that's the Florida House,'" Carol Ann said.

They're not alone, of course. Nearly 100 people -- records are sketchy because of the loss of surveys from the center's early days -- have built their own versions of the Florida House or plan to do so, Alpaugh said.

Not all go to the level of the Breyers -- or, of course, to the extremes of the Ocala twin homes. Many just pick and choose from the array of details and technologies on display at the model home, incorporating the best into personalized versions of the Florida House.

As Patricia Lynch did.

"I visited the Florida House one day and just loved it," said the Ohio transplant, an artist by trade.

Chiefly, she said of that 2002 visit, she loved how the high ceilings, open layout and expansive porches created an airy living space -- that, and the air movement afforded by sliding doors and transom windows.

So, a year later, she rolled those elements into designing her home at 2323 Benson St., Sarasota. It was then built using a novel construction method she had seen displayed at the center, a technique to quickly and cheaply build walls by pouring concrete into preformed, pre-insulated molds.

She capped it off with landscaping highlighted at the center, adding bamboo and other plants to block the sun's heat from directly striking windows, doors or main walls.

In keeping with the Florida House ideal, it's been a good fit all around.

"My energy bills are half of what a normal house would be," Lynch said. "And the space just works so wonderfully. It feels so comfortable."

"The affordability of it was great," she added. "Being an artist, I need to think about those things."

Well, most everyone needs to think about those things.

It costs more to build green. Period. End of discussion.

Um, question mark? Start of debate?

"That's hard to say," Roy Bonnell, executive director of the Florida Green Building Coalition, said of any cost difference. "There haven't really been any studies done on the cost to build green homes."

While many assume the cost is higher -- and even Carol Ann Breyer acknowledged higher costs, without offering a dollar figure -- much of the difference depends on what green features are added and when, Bonnell said.

Adding a cupola or porch while the house is being built likely carries a smaller price tag than retrofitting an existing home. But adding an energy-saving stove would cost roughly the same for a new or existing home, assuming the existing home's stove had reached the end of its life, anyway.

Even the folks at the Florida House advise homeowners to weigh the costs against benefits before diving into projects.

"It's got to be practical," Balchin said.

A lot of people have found it to be practical, at least on some level. The center's surveys show that of the 10,000 or so who make the trek to the Florida House in a given year, some 1,500 report they have incorporated something from the model into their own homes:

The light bulb swap.

Or solar panels.

Or tankless water heaters.

"If they're starting to think -- what do they say, 'Think globally, act locally'? -- people can do little things at their homes," Alpaugh said.

Or, for a growing number, they can do big things in their homes.

Really big things, that is, that are their homes.

"You've got to have people living in this design and validating it through their lifestyle," Carol Ann Breyer said. "It's really, really a great design."
