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SEEKING REFUGE IN MONTANA

By Heidi Lasher

Even as the building industry booms in the Gallatin Valley, an alternative building revolution is changing the way we look at our homes and offices. At its helm are the architects, builders, and homeowners willing to look for new directions in the way homes are designed and built. And new on deck is Refuge Sustainable Building Center in Bozeman. Refuge carries a range of environmentally sustainable building materials, non-toxic paints, flooring, roofing, adhesives, and toilets to meet the needs of area residents who wish to incorporate “green” practices into their homes and offices.

The Tributary interviewed storeowner, David Schaub, to find out more about the building center and its role in promoting sustainable building practices.

Why did you decide to open this store? I had taught kindergarten and middle school for a number of years and always looked at teaching as a way of creating social change. Later, I started recognizing the power that business has in shaping consumption patterns and government policies in this country. I wanted to see if I could open a business focused on more than money—one that promotes social and environmental change and fosters sustainability. After working on my own home and seeing a friend build a straw bale home, I thought that working in the building materials industry might make a difference in the way our built environment is developed.

What do you mean by the built environment? I remember learning that 40 percent of all land-fill space in the United States is taken up by building material waste. That, in conjunction with the rapid growth that many communities in the West are experiencing, made me think about the impact that the building industry has on the natural environment. Much of the growth we see today contributes to car-oriented sprawl that most people who move to Bozeman are trying to get away from. By selling sustainable materials and promoting building practices that are in line with a lower-impact way of living, I feel like I can offer an alternative to the high-impact development that is going on around Bozeman.

What kind of alternatives are you offering? A lot of the materials I sell are made from recycled products, and therefore divert materials from the waste stream. Most of these products are also more durable than conventional materials and need less frequent replacement. I'm creating a resource library and look forward to hosting workshops on alternative building strategies so people can incorporate the larger concepts of sustainable development that go beyond building materials. The goal is to help people build homes that are more energy efficient, using materials that have a lower environmental or health impact.

What kind of health impact can building materials have? More and more studies are showing that our indoor air quality, on average, is much worse (in terms of parts-per-million of pollutants) than even our most polluted outdoor urban environments. Conventional building materials are full of solvents and preservatives that have been shown to have adverse health effects. Urea formaldehyde, for example, is a known carcinogen and frequently causes eye, throat, and skin irritations. It is a common ingredient in building products including OSB plywood, sealers, insulation, flooring, carpeting, paints, and stains.

As an alternative, I try to sell products manufactured without dangerous preservatives and solvents. For example, I carry particleboard made from compressed wheat and rice fibers, free of adhesives and chemicals that usually off-gas into the interior environment. The result is a less polluted home.

How much do these materials cost? The upfront cost is between 10 and 50 percent higher than most conventional building materials. But when looked at on a lifetime analysis, many products associated with green building actually save money over time. The savings come from increased energy efficiency and decreased water usage, and they also come in the form of personal and public health savings. Societally, we bear a huge cost for treating cancer, asthma, and chemical sensitivities—I feel like this is one way of avoiding those costs and some of the associated pain and suffering.

It's important when comparing costs, to also compare the products themselves. For example, I sell a recycled denim bat insulation that costs \$0.75/sq.ft. You can compare it to fiberglass insulation with the same R-value, and find that the cost is higher. But the denim insulation is itch-free, non-toxic, and easy to work with. Compare that with fiberglass bat insulation, which must be installed using a protective suit and facemask. Anyone who has worked with the stuff would choose to pay a little bit more just to avoid the discomfort of installation.

There is a very similar argument with organic foods. The product costs more, but you are generally getting a better product that has both health and environmental benefits. The choice is reflective of a set of ideals that many consumers consider important.

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Refuge Sustainable Building Center is located at 714 E Mendenhall, across from Montana Custom Furniture. For questions, call 585-9958.