

CHOOSING A GREEN BUILDING PROFESSIONAL

A Factsheet from Austin Energy's Green Building Program

Do you want to build a more energy-efficient, durable and healthier home or commercial building—one that's easy on the planet and on your pocketbook too? Are you wondering how to find someone who can build such a building? If you live in Central Texas, you're in luck. There are many building professionals here who are capable of building just about any shade of "green" you might desire. This factsheet tells you where to find a green professional, and explains what you should know before you start looking and what you should ask once you've found one.

Where Can I Find a Green Building Professional?

Austin Energy's Green Building Program is a marketing and education program which facilitates environmentally-sound building. Building professionals who agree to promote green building, and who attend periodic technical seminars, may be members of this program. Their names, along with descriptions of their professional services, are listed in the [Green Building Program Member Directory](#).

Austin's Sustainable Building Coalition (SBC) is a grassroots education and networking organization with both professional and lay members. Attending the monthly meetings (third Wednesday evening of the month) is a good way to learn more about green building issues, and will help you sort out what is most important to you. For more information go to www.greenbuilder.com/sbc/default.html.

Please note that none of these programs and organizations gives *certification*. Any interested professional (and in the case of the SBC, any interested person) may join. Membership does not guarantee any specified level of expertise. Get to know the person you are considering contracting with by checking credentials and references carefully. Time spent getting to know this person will prove invaluable.

First Things First!

Before you start interviewing builders or designers, be sure to clarify your own wants and needs. For example, do you prefer a fairly standard-looking house in a standard subdivision or a standard office shell in a typical office park? Or would you prefer something unique? Are you fascinated by high-tech or do you prefer the simplest possible approach, even "old-fashioned" looks and ways of doing things? Are you adventuresome and ready to try all sorts of new ideas (including "new old ideas" like straw bale or rammed-earth construction), or would you rather stick to standard methods and materials? Would you like to work intimately with the builder in developing your plans, specifications and building process, or would you rather just be presented with a finished product? Do you or the other building occupants have any special health problems which must be addressed. Or are you just the typical Central Texan with a few vague allergies which you hope won't get any worse?

Bear in mind that there is no such thing as "the perfect green building" and make the best choices you can given your budget, personality, taste, lifestyle and philosophy. Other issues, including the availability of materials and expertise in your area, and the present state of our understanding of building technology and what building "green" means will also significantly impact your building decisions.

To learn more about green building, and what materials and methods are viable in Central Texas, contact the City of Austin's Green Building Program. Our staff can tell you about basic principles and direct you to other people, books and articles that will further your knowledge. After increasing your own understanding of green building and determining your priorities and interests as thoroughly as you can, contact several builders who seem like the best match for you.

PLANNING

How Green is Your Builder or Designer?

Even though you are looking for a “green” builder or designer, don’t neglect to get all the usual information. Be sure you find out what this builder or designer’s track record is for building a good product, on time. Find out how long this company has been in business and if this building professional can talk to you in a straightforward way about costs. Most importantly, you need to know if you are likely to be compatible with this builder over the long haul of this sometimes arduous and intimate process.

Once you have satisfied yourself about all these matters, go on to “greener” questions, but remember, when considering working with any professional, choose your battles wisely. The chances of finding a professional who can favorably answer ALL of these questions are slim.

- **Does this building professional have a green philosophy of building?** Does this person understand how building practices relate to the broader environment? Does it matter to him or her how our use of resources will affect the world we leave for our children? Do you think this person is trying to give you the “right” answers just to get your money, or do they demonstrate real commitment to the health of the planet?
- **Does this person demonstrate a general knowledge of green building?** If you ask about low-VOC paints, non-ozone-depleting insulation, heating and cooling design by Manual J, composting, sealed-combustion appliances, passive solar design, and just get a blank stare, chances are this person is not a green building professional. Be sure to do your homework on these topics first!
- **If you are interested in an unconventional material or technique, does this person have the expertise and experience to provide you with it?** You might, for example, be interested in a rainwater collection system, or an earth-sheltered house. If no one in the area has done what you want, can this professional demonstrate the ability to accomplish something out of the ordinary?
- **Does this person keep up with advances in the field of green building?** Do they attend Sustainable Building Coalition meetings? Austin Energy Green Building Program seminars and conferences? Read major publications such as Environmental Building News? Are they familiar with innovative local green building projects? Does the builder know who in the area is doing various kinds of green building?
- **Does this person understand the importance of a team approach in producing a good green home?** A building is a system, all parts affecting all other parts. Does the builder see the designer, the subcontractors, and you, the client, as equally important players on the same team, all working together to bring into being a high-quality building where you can be happy, comfortable, and productive?
- **Is this builder proud and happy to show you their work?** Is this builder glad to have you call on former clients and visit completed projects? What green measures have they included in their past projects? What are they recommending for your particular project? How much will the building exceed any recognized standards? Can the person provide any warranties?

What’s This Going to Cost?

Do not be deterred from building green because you are afraid you can’t afford it. It’s true that some green building options cost more than the standard alternative, but some of the most environmentally-friendly buildings available are among the least costly. It pays to be a knowledgeable buyer, and as in many other purchases we make in our lives, you also often get what you pay for. A good green builder or designer has a real understanding of what truly makes a more environmentally-friendly building and knows precisely what to specify to get it.

If a desirable option costs more up front, take the longest view you can. Examine how it would actually affect your monthly mortgage payment. Think about how often you might have to repair or replace this item. If the item has implications for occupant health, consider this seriously, even if you can’t put a precise dollar figure on it initially.