

RICHARD C. LEWIS

**Construction of green multifamily buildings near transit options is on the rise across the United States, spurring both economic and lifestyle benefits for residents and developers.**

IT SEEMS LIKE IT WAS ONLY A GENERATION ago when most people who could afford it opted to live in the suburbs. The idea was to escape the hustle and the bustle of city life for the tranquility of the country, a feat made easy by being able to drive to and from work and anyplace else.

But as suburbs become burdened with many of the same problems already confronted by cities—population density, traffic, and pollution, to name a few—more people are contemplating returning to urban areas. Architects and developers have noticed the phenomenon and are responding by developing green buildings that employ the latest in environmentally friendly technologies and locating these structures near public transportation.

Indeed, sustainable buildings are being constructed nationwide, with units ranging from luxury condominiums for the wealthy to apartments for low-income residents. According to the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC), more than 500 building projects of all types, with 65 million square feet of space, have been certified under the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) program, created by the USGBC to judge a project's environmental compatibility. More than 4,000 other building projects are expected to receive LEED certification in the next three to five years, says Taryn Holowka, spokeswoman for the council.

"I definitely think it is increasing, but I don't know what's driving it," Holowka says

of sustainable development. "I think it's the whole urban sprawl. Instead of building out, we're trying to get people to build up."

Developers say a key component of sustainable building is proximity to public transit. The reasons are varied: such projects appeal to people's desire to conserve energy, safeguard the environment, and reduce vehicular pollution, and they promote a healthier lifestyle by encouraging walking. There are economic benefits, as well, such as lower energy bills and financial savings from not having to pay for increasingly expensive gasoline.

"It's really kind of offering a fuller range of services to people," said Beth Steckler, policy director for Livable Places, a nonprofit organization in Los Angeles that favors new development near public transit as a way to preserve mixed-income neighborhoods. "There will be some people motivated by the greenness of it. Others will be motivated more by location."

Developers confirm that they are motivated by location, with many asserting that proximity to public transit is an integral consideration when they choose where to construct a green building. The USGBC recognizes this by awarding LEED points to projects that are within a half mile of commuter rail or a subway or within a quarter mile of two or more bus lines, Holowka said. Also, some municipalities offer tax incentives, expedite approval, or waive fees on projects built near public transportation. California requires developments seeking

# THE sustainability mobility LINK

“Where before people had to view **[living in a green building]** as a sacrifice, I think we’re really past that and simply dealing with economics.”

public funding to be oriented toward transit, says Gwynne Pugh, an architect and the planning commissioner in the densely populated seaside city of Santa Monica.

Pugh, whose firm, Pugh+Scarpa Architects, built a model green building for low-income residents in Santa Monica, thinks policy makers will continue to push for sustainable buildings around public transit. “We do live in an urban environment, and to make that environment into the highest quality you can, you need to look at a lot of uses, and that’s what smart growth is,” he says. “It’s oriented toward sustainability.”

Those considering a green lifestyle range from young professionals to retirees, according to developers. They are as interested in an improved quality of life as they are in being good stewards of the planet. Advocates say those who live in sustainable housing near transit take fewer sick days at work and experience less stress than those consigned to long, tedious automobile commutes.

“Where before people had to view [living in a green building] as a sacrifice, I think we’re really past that and simply dealing with economics,” says Steckler, who ditched her car and takes public transportation to her job in Los Angeles.

One barrier to more widespread production of sustainable multifamily buildings is the extra cost of buying and installing green technologies in the developments. But Holowka says state and local governments are offering incentives to encourage sustainable construc-

tion. New York and Oregon offer tax credits of \$3,000 to \$5,000, she says, while some cities offer tax breaks of up to \$10,000.

Green architects and developers have different motivations for their work. Russell Katz, for instance, is an architect who does not like to drive, so perhaps it should come as no surprise that when he decided to build a sustainable apartment complex in Washington, D.C., he located it near public transit.

The development, Elevation 314, was completed in August 2004. Located across the street from a Metrorail subway station serving the Washington metropolitan area, the 52-unit rental building is also a model of environmental ingenuity. It has a geothermal heating and cooling system, a recycling system for tenants, and 47 parking spaces for bicycles, compared with 38 spaces for cars. The courtyard and the landscaped area over the covered

parking garage operate as a stormwater management system, filtering the runoff before it is released to the city’s sewer system.

The ecological features in Katz’s development are “just a good business decision,” he says. “Hands down, it’s a moneymaker and a money saver over the life of the project.”

Katz, who grew up in Washington, explains that he saw the value of mass transit while living in Europe. Surveying the D.C. market, he was surprised that real estate around the city’s Metro stations was not highly valued. That has changed, however, and Katz thinks it is only a matter of time before the trend catches on elsewhere, too.

“I think, on the one hand, Americans have this frontier mentality of moving away from cities,” he says. “But I think with the development of exurbs, people are so far away from the center of things and end up driving so far



PUGH+SCARPA ARCHITECTS

every day, that there's a reaction against that." People begin to put a higher value on not having to drive.

Elevation 314 was Katz's first sustainable building project. The 37-year-old architect outfitted the units with energy-efficient lighting, ceiling fans, and floors made of bamboo from sustainable-growth forests. He disagrees with those in the industry who complain that green

Vacancies at Elevation 314 are rare, and when an apartment does become available, it is quickly taken, Katz says. That is one reason why he thinks there is healthy demand for sustainable buildings near transit. "People who are building them for investment purposes, looking for a return, they're going to clue in and realize that greater energy efficiency with a new building



**The \$4.3 million Colorado Court complex (facing page) in Santa Monica provides sustainable, affordable housing along a bus corridor, and will eventually be located within blocks of a new light-rail station. Washington, D.C.'s Elevation 314 (above and left), completed in August 2004, is across the street from a Metrorail station, and the sustainable building rarely has vacancies.**

buildings are too costly to construct, saying that the bamboo flooring cost the same as hardwood floors and that the energy-saving features have resulted in lower operating costs for the building.

is really good business, and the market is underserved," he notes.

He now is looking for the next opportunity. "I think this market can support a lot more green buildings," Katz says. "I'm going to build more."

Green construction linked with public transit is not a phenomenon solely tied to the nation's coasts. In Evanston, Illinois, plans are moving briskly to build the city's first sustainable project.

Mike DeRouin, associate principal at Chicago-based FitzGerald Associates Architects, is the designer of a \$35 million project called Winthrop Club. Located near a subway and commuter rail lines, the 15-story, 114-unit condominium project is in the heart of Evanston, which is about 20 miles north of Chicago. It is due to be completed by the end of 2007.

"Downtown Evanston is going through a renaissance of residential development, so it's sort of a natural location for it to happen," says DeRouin.

Winthrop Club is seeking a LEED Silver certification, which would make it the first building in Evanston to attain a LEED designation and the first multifamily tower in Illinois to achieve the Silver level, according to DeRouin. Designers have incorporated sustainable elements into the design, such as low-flow fixtures, two-stage flush toilets, and a system for storing and reusing rainwater for irrigation. Plans also call for a green roof on the tower and on the parking garage, which will double as a backyard for fifth-floor residents.

DeRouin says the green features are part of a trend in urban design that is going to continue. "Right now, it's a nice thing, but in the near future, it's going to be codified in many municipalities," he predicts. "This is not a fad that is going to go away. This is going to be the future of building design."

It is also a future where more will be cognizant of higher prices and dwindling resources.

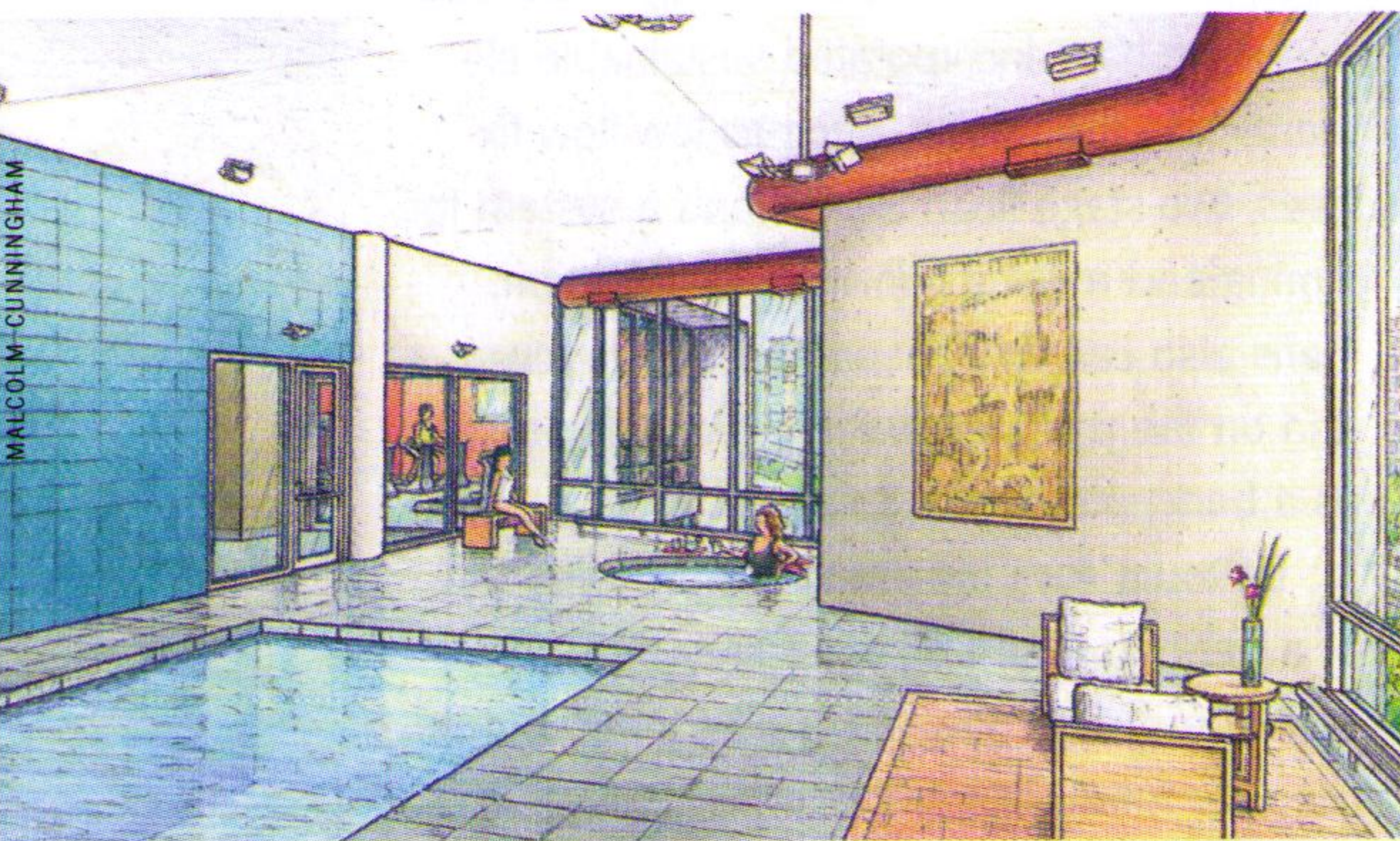
"I think everybody realizes that energy prices are never going to go back down, and in general, building material costs are not going down, either," he says. "The cost of everything seems to be going up and up and up, and people realize that if we don't start reusing what we've already created, we're going to fast and furiously not have a place for anyone to live, work, and play."

The designers think Winthrop Club will appeal to two groups: young professionals attuned to environmentalism, and empty nesters shedding large homes and seeking to take advantage of living in a city center. "This project will put them right in the heart of that," DeRouin says.

Green building has been de rigeur in southern California, where attentiveness to the environment is so common that it is hardly noticed. But even with steady sustainable construction, one project stands out: Colorado Court.

The \$4.3 million project in Santa Monica, completed as a showcase development in 2001, drew attention because it set a new standard for green housing that could be affordable. The location was dictated in part by the fact that the city owned the land, says Robin Raida, project director at the Community Corporation of Santa Monica, a nonprofit group that specializes in affordable housing, and the project manager for Colorado Court.

**Winthrop Club, located near a subway and commuter rail lines in Evanston, Illinois, is seeking LEED Silver certification, which would make it the first building in Evanston to attain a LEED designation and the first multifamily tower in Illinois to receive the Silver level.**



The renters at Colorado Court are low-income residents “on the lowest rung,” says Pugh, the project’s architect. Many cannot afford cars, he says, which explains why there are 20 parking spaces for 44 studio apartments.

The renters’ income profile and the decision to build fewer parking spaces are reasons why Colorado Court is located near the bus line that serves Santa Monica. There are also plans to build a light-rail station, as an extension of the Los Angeles light-rail network, within blocks of Colorado Court that will connect the neighborhood to Los Angeles by 2011, according to Pugh.

“It’s an economic issue, so being adjacent to public transit is tremendously important,” Pugh says.

Colorado Court is spread over three buildings designed specifically to take advantage of the southern California climate. The three paral-

lel buildings are connected to each other by walkways, and every unit has windows on each side to allow cross-ventilation. Also, the windows facing southwest are smaller to cut down on the heat from the sun, while the windows facing north are larger to take advantage of the cooler temperatures created by the shade.

The building gets its power from solar photovoltaic panels and from an on-site microturbine that converts natural gas into electricity. The solar panels have worked well, but the turbine has not been as efficient as imagined, Raida says.

Despite that, Raida calls the project a success, adding that tenants are happy with the units and love the location. “Sustainable development is especially important for affordable housing because it keeps utility costs down for families and people in the units,” she notes.

She thinks the trend toward sustainable development will continue. “As technology improves, it will become easier and easier. A lot of [the elements] that were initiated for Colorado Court, the city has adopted them, and a lot of projects now follow that.”

Pugh says it is inevitable that green building projects in Santa Monica will be near public transit because of the city’s high density and the fact that it is an expensive place in which to live. He acknowledges that policy makers have been leading the push, but thinks the rising price of gasoline is causing more to consider green living on their own.

“It just made sense to us,” says Pugh. **MFT**

**RICHARD C. LEWIS** is a freelance writer based in Bristol, Rhode Island.