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# TOP 10 GREEN BUILDING PRODUCTS 2007

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200  
MARKET BUILDING

Green Building Services



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## Table of contents

### 10 The Top 10 List

*Sustainable Industries'* picks for the Top 10 Green Building Products of 2007.

|                     |    |
|---------------------|----|
| Apricus             | 12 |
| Brac Systems        | 13 |
| Clivus Multrum      | 14 |
| Eleek               | 15 |
| Green Products      | 16 |
| Insulspan           | 17 |
| Neil Kelly          | 18 |
| Silenceair          | 19 |
| Southwest Windpower | 20 |
| Warmboard           | 21 |

### 22 Commentary

For architects and design firms that want to use green materials, knowledge is power. *By Eden Brukman*

### 26 The Judges

Our crack team of judges who helped select this year's top 10 picks.

[www.sustainableindustries.com](http://www.sustainableindustries.com)

#### Special Online Article!

Visit the *Sustainable Industries* Web site to find out more about the top print and online resources for finding, selecting and specifying green building materials. *Article by Brian Libby*

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# “Winning gold. Building green.”



Enthusiasm is contagious. Early this year the new Renaissance Design Center won gold as *the Best Design Center in the Country*. (At the National Homebuilders' Sales and Marketing Awards.)



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The talented professionals at the Design Center design model homes and also work individually with each new home buyer.

We also won silver, a national runner-up award for green building marketing. In fact, Renaissance is now a considered a national leader in residential green building.

Years ago we were the first major local builder to commit to all green building. Since then the Living Green program keeps evolving. New green features includes a Manager of Building Science, committed full time to making Living Green even better. We now partner with both Earth Advantage and Energy Star.

Why live green? A green built home is more energy efficient. You breathe healthier indoor air. And with so many environmentally friendly features, Mother Nature will love you, too.



## “Someday, all homes will be built green”

Randy Sebastian  
President



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HOMES

[Renaissance-Homes.com](http://Renaissance-Homes.com)

# What defines a green material?

BY EDEN BRUKMAN



In the realm of green building, the sum of the parts is greater than the whole. There is no all-encompassing material that can champion a project's success in its quest for sustainability; instead, each component contributes to a unique aspect of construction. Further, a material's static characteristics are valued differently, depending on specific project goals. And even a product with beneficial attributes can have lasting negative environmental and social impacts through its assembly, manufacture, distribution, installation and disposal.

The answer to the "green material" question is embedded in a shifted mind-set, rather than in a physical entity. As a transformative methodology, SERA Architects applies a filter for decision-making inspired by The Natural Step's Four System Conditions and captured in four words:

- ▷ **Take:** Can the earth replace what I take?
- ▷ **Make:** Am I poisoning soil, water or air?
- ▷ **Respect:** Do I respect the biodiversity of flora and fauna?
- ▷ **Choose:** Are the choices I make fair and equitable?

These principles establish the fundamental framework for SERA's material selection processes throughout the various phases of design and construction.

There are several common methods for an architecture firm to build a material library, ranging from individual online research to the popular vendor-sponsored product lunch. In the latter instance, vendors (sometimes

as many as five a week) contact the firm wanting to share their line of merchandise in the hope that a product will be included in an upcoming project.

Over the course of the past year, SERA began using this initial connection as an opportunity to gather data: Each vendor is now asked to complete a basic one-page questionnaire that surveys aspects of material content, manufacturing practice and corporate environmental policy. The questionnaire serves to prescreen manufacturers, and also informs them of SERA's objectives and expectations. Roughly half of the vendors decline to partake in the survey and disappear. The other 50 percent move on to round two, often expanding their presentation to include topics appropriate for our audience.

It is not unusual for a vendor presentation to quickly evolve into a conversation about product particulars. At SERA, it often becomes a dialogue focused on culling an additional layer of information about a product's ecological footprint. Some vendors ask questions about the various green building rating systems and how their products can contribute. Others, who are familiar with the general classifications, provide fact sheets and calculations.

Every so often, vendors designate a product as "sustainable," despite its lack of any quantifiably green feature. Our staff is wary of greenwash, and we use these occasions to talk about the definitions of green materials and important concepts of sustainable design. Interior designer Alison Dion finds the supplier feedback loop to be pivotal to SERA's role. "I feel our job as designers and architects is to not only be educated about the products we specify and their environmental implications but also to help educate manufacturers that are falsely portraying their products as green," she says.

Throughout a project's design development, specific products are incorporated into the detail drawings and specifications. As a means to guide the

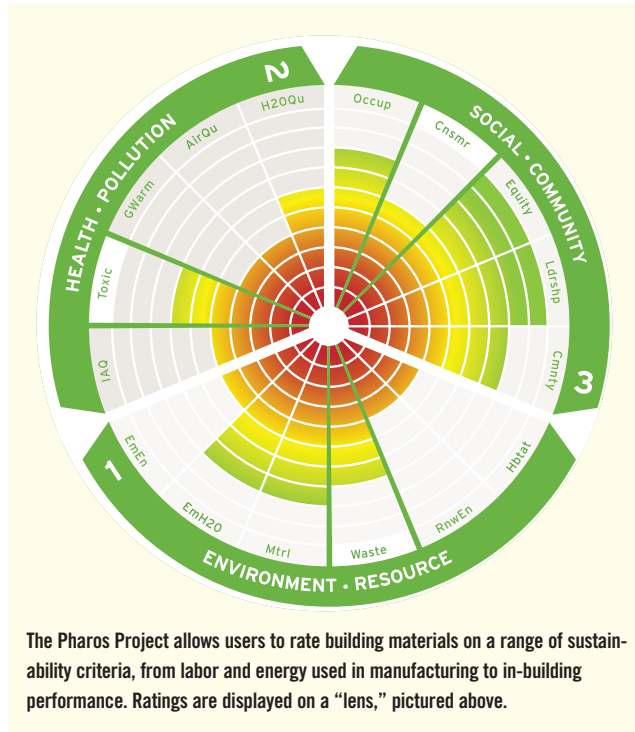


SERA Architects recently renovated its downtown Portland offices, earning a Platinum rating under the U.S. Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design program.

process, SERA established a core committee to create an intra-office materials database populated with the statistics gathered from the vendor questionnaire and other relevant information. Naturally, material selection is fluid — manufacturers are constantly “improving” their products — and cannot rely on the certainty that a material specified in the early stages of design will have the same characteristics when it is installed. Therefore, staff members engage in discussions with suppliers, manufacturers and even plant supervisors, in an effort to glean a comprehensive understanding of a product.

Some companies claim the information is proprietary, but many are willing to impart some details. Bonnie Bruce, senior interior designer at SERA, experienced firsthand the results of reaching out to industry. “You know you are having an effect on transforming the market when an FSC forest owner, a forester, makes a marketing call to an interior designer,” she says. “I have been a practicing interior designer for over two decades, and never has the source made the effort to seek me out. I loved it!”

Even after a contractor approves a product for purchase, SERA explores additional measures to reduce a product’s life-cycle costs, such as alternate



options for material transport to the job site. Equally performing, regionally produced products are always given preference, but inevitably some materials need to travel. For one project, Bruce worked with a leading manufacturer to ship carpet via rail instead of truck. The manufacturer’s representative, looking for ways to improve the company’s environmental stewardship, determined the shift would yield not only monetary savings, but also a 10 percent decrease in emissions, representing 17 tons of carbon dioxide.

Ultimately, our goal is to share our successes with others in order to magnify the possibilities. To this end, SERA staff are enlisting in the Pharos Project, an upcoming Web-based rating system and guide founded on interactive communication about material selection. Through deep collaboration, the design and construction industry can enact change. Once the channels are open, the knowledge will flow.

*Eden Brukman works with project teams to meet their green building goals as a LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) coordinator at SERA Architects in Portland.*

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