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Green House Effect

Lean, green, free housing for the homeless

The building on Oakland's International Boulevard is an architectural milestone, with its obtuse-angled, brightly colored walls and 186 solar panels. But, no, it's not a corporate headquarters or a chic modern residence or even a hotel. It does sleep 125 people, but all of them are homeless.

The Crossroads shelter, which opened earlier this week, is believed to be the nation's first newly constructed green homeless shelter. The \$11 million project has some high-tech green features—the solar roof, hydronic, hot water heating—and some low-tech attributes that are just as green; ceiling fans, which circulate the warm and cool air, and windows that actually open to let in the lovely northern California climate are among them. Tall windows spread natural light (and one assumes the rest of the lighting is in the compact fluorescent vain). The furniture is made of compressed wheat, not the cheap particleboard that off-gases formaldehyde when wet.

The East Oakland Community Project, which runs the shelter, replaced their damp and drafty shelter with this marvel of green not only for the eventual energy savings but for the indoor health aspects of green—according to the National Coalition for the Homeless, folks without housing “are far more likely to suffer from every category of severe health problem... tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS, diabetes, hypertension, addictive disorders, and mental disorders.”

Besides the green features, the shelter is intended to be a model of humane design; an entire floor is dedicated for homeless families (they get bathtubs, too), and another wing is slated for respite, for folks recently released from the hospital.

A growing number of low-income green housing projects are beginning to dot the landscape, from Seattle's Denny Park Apartments to **WHEDCO's green public housing in the South Bronx**. They renovated an abandoned hospital to make low-income units, and started another project, Energy Star-certified, for homeless families in the neighborhood.

Of course, that still leaves the middle class—and renters—scrambling to get in on the green game. They, too (or should I say we?) can slather low-VOC paint on the walls (although Benjamin Moore's Aura line costs about twice as much as a traditional can of paint, based on my own experience painting my bedroom this weekend) and decorate with organic cotton curtains, or something. But it seems builders can learn a thing or two from looking at green housing for those without homes.