BUILDING FOR THE FUTURE

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By BRAD BROBERG Special to the Journal
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Tom Bender's sustainable architecture practice attracts more wok than he can handle.

Tom Bender is an Oregon architect whose work combines the principles of sustainable design with a philosophy he calls "energetics of place." His Bank of Astoria building in his hometown of Manzanita, OR, was named a 2001 National Award Winner for Sustainable Design by the AIA Architecture and Energy Program.

Prior to establishing his practice in Manzanita, Bender taught architecture and later worked for former Oregon Gov. Tom McCall as an energy researcher. Bender also co-edited Rain Magazine, a Portland-based publication devoted to sustainable living issues. Bender has published four books. His latest, "Learning to Count What Really Counts," - about sustainable economics - will be out in January.

Bender spoke with DJC special correspondent Brad Broberg:

What is sustainable design?

It's doing everything in a way that ensures we all have a future at least as good as today. Sustainability is everything from maximizing energy efficiency to using renewable resources as construction materials to locating buildings near where people live to reduce traffic congestion

What are the main benefits of sustainable design?

Energy and material efficiency, less environmental disruption. Healthier soils, less erosion, better food. More pleasant buildings and happier people. Less pollution, fewer poisons, less illness. Better economic productivity. Healthier and more meaningful lives.

Why isn't sustainable design practiced mote often ?

It's new, but moving very rapidly into the marketplace. Government and business leaders, environmentalists and community advocates all see the immense benefits. Barriers are being replaced by incentives. We're just learning the huge costs of conventional practices that discount the future, that ignore the full costs over the lifetime of a building, that ignore or externalize costs to others.

How do clients respond to your emphasis on sustainable design ?

Judging by the amount of work I'm turning away, they're very excited. They feel good using less energy while saving money. They know how different it feels to work or live in the buildings. They understand the real economics, where we all profit. They like doing good things for the community while ending up with a better product themselves. How far I go depends on the owner's wishes.

How has your notion of sustainable design expanded over the years?

The energy and material aspects many people emphasize today, I was pioneering 25 years ago. I've gone on to develop more of the psychological, emotional, spiritual aspects of sustainability. Some people call it feng shui. I call it energetics of place.

It means working with relationships rather than organization, meaning instead of style, connection rather than aesthetics and inner rather than surface characteristics. It demands integrity of material choice, design and use. It stresses the importance of paying attention to our

tummies - how we feel about a place, the psychology of place, and the role of our minds, fears and dreams.

This is something I don't push as part of sustainability, but I use it, and the results are impressive.

How do you use it?

I look at how a building's design affects the performance of the people in it. For example, I talk with clients about their employee turnover rate, absentee rate, goof-up and goof-off rates.

These can be nightmares and have major impact on the success of a business, but don't show up on the balance sheet. Buildings that are physically and emotionally healthy to work in where people feel cared about have significant impact on productivity.

Though it's a big "lump cost" item, construction and operation of an office building represents only about eight percent of a business's costs, once employee salaries are included. It's been well documented that buildings that improve productivity only a few points could cost enormously more and still make money.

How does the Bank of Astoria building reflect sustainable design and the energetics place?

It relies on combinations of natural materials and richer color palettes, replaces air conditioning with fresh air, efficient equipment and night ventilation. It uses daylighting and efficient lighting, and a building envelope twice as efficient as code.

Its rainwater system puts the water back into the ground, while making it a thing of beauty in the process. It has a sense of style and charm that is very unusual for an institutional building. The windows and skylights let natural light in through the leaves of trees, so the light is always changing as the wind blows the leaves. That way, you stay much more connected with the world outside.

Anything else?

In the process of construction, we used wood obtained within 10 or 15 miles of the site, eliminating transportation costs and energy use while supporting the local economy and making wise use of local resources. We gave the bark from the cedar tree that is a center post in the building to an artist who makes cedar baskets. We salvaged the plants on site to use as landscaping in other projects. In dozens of ways, we tried to make best use of human and natural resources.

Why is sustainability so important to you?

I want to leave a world with a future to our children. I'm tired of friends dying all around me with cancer from the poisons they've eaten and breathed. We've been looking at many things terribly wrongly, causing epidemic diseases of the spirit and doing great damage to the world around us, both to people and natural resources. Looked at differently, things line up to give immensely greater benefits to all.