



## SPOTLIGHT ON GREEN BUILDERS

### FLUID Construction founder Adam Sinclair Young, Green and Never Satisfied

*By Jacqueline Herships*

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Bright-eyed, idealistic Green Home-Builder, Adam Sinclair, has taken a hard look at the world of residential building and found it wanting. "There's got to be a better way," he says -- but it's going to take a lot of doing to get there. To his mind, that better way will include LEED for Homes certifications (<http://www.usgbc.org/DisplayPage.aspx?CMSPageID=147>), and post occupancy evaluations (POEs), an information gathering process which he knows will never win a popularity contest among builders. "Nobody wants their flaws pointed out," he explained. But, he's ready to bring them on for himself and his crew. We won't mind, he says – it will just make us better builders.

A hard-working perfectionist based in Atlantic Highlands, Mr. Sinclair presents as a friendly, easy-going, 'aw shucks' kind of guy. But, in fact, he says he is never satisfied. "It's a problem," he acknowledges, "I always know things can be done better. That there's something else that can be changed."

This is the way of being he levels at both growing his business and the challenge of building green, which he is currently taking on with two new residential projects: one, for a client, aims at achieving a LEED for Homes Gold certification, the other, an Energy Star Certified home which was built on spec. "To achieve a LEED for Homes certification you must complete the Energy Star certification--so I can do both," he said. "Energy Star looks at the operation of the home, the mechanicals. LEED for Homes combines whole building design with an integrated systems approach that also focuses on the impact of a home on its surrounding environment." The earliest of his recent projects is built to the standard state and municipal code requirements. Today, he will not build a home for anyone unless they are at least willing to go Energy Star – and he would prefer them to go for LEED, he said.

Yet, in spite of his own total emersion into green building, Adam Sinclair worries that progress in the wider world is moving at a snails pace. "We are not building structures to correct standards for the 21<sup>st</sup> c., especially on the residential side," he says. "Builders are behaving the same way they have since the building boom of the

1950s when the idea was to get 'em up and sell 'em; or sell 'em before you even build 'em. That's when building quality went down, and building quantity went up – and that's where we find ourselves today," he says. Although small builders such as Mr. Sinclair are chipping away at the problem, he feels that until production builders begin taking the lead, it isn't going to be enough. Building green makes him sleep better at night but he says the greater good of the environment remains in jeopardy. "Production builders are always looking at ways to build smarter and to be more cost efficient. Now they need to focus more on energy consumption and environmental impact," he said.

This is where post occupancy evaluations (POEs) enter into the mix, according to Jennifer Senick, Executive Director of the Rutgers Center for Green Building at the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy. "Buildings are programmed to meet the anticipated needs of occupants in areas such as energy, water efficiency, and the durability of materials," she explained. "POEs are about measuring a building's performance against what it was projected to do, and they also study occupants' satisfaction as well as their habits and behaviors within structures." Thus, POEs form a feed back loop leading to better design as well as better operation of buildings, she explained. Noting that a lot of green building is about remembering practices we've forgotten, she gave the easily understood example of day lighting, an important concept in the green building movement because it reduces reliance on electricity, among other things. But, in fact, someone could have their study in a place, which is day-lit, and then discover there is glare on their computer screen. So they pull the blinds, at which point there is not enough light; so they turn on the lights. Really good design professionals are aware that when humans and technology get together the results can be unpredictable, she noted, saying that a lot more attention is deserved in this area.

In spite of the passion which Mr. Sinclair feels for green building, it was a career accident rather than a career choice which propelled him into construction in 1997. A self-described "18 year old wise ass," he got himself fired from his job as a Longbranch Beach life guard and hired the same day by a renovation / restoration project which became Bed and Breakfast "Into the Sea" located in Avon by the Sea in Monmouth. "I was fired in the morning and hired that afternoon," he remembers. He remained with that company until he launched FLUID Construction LLC, in November of 2002. It was just himself and one helper. Working long hours, to high standards, and charging low prices, he worked his way up to a five-man crew and near bankruptcy...until his accountant called a halt. "I was working a 60-80 hour week and losing money," he recalls. Exhausted and discouraged, he considered turning his back on the whole enterprise. But no other builders he knew of were doing what he wanted to do. So he took a deep breath and decided that what was needed was more brain and less brawn. Hitting the books, he examined his business with a fine toothcomb, raised his prices and paired down once again to just himself and one helper. Today, his business is growing. Though still based primarily on word of mouth, the future's looking good and he's got big plans for a new website, web-based advertising, and a focused mailer campaign to architects and other change agent professionals. In short, things have turned around and he looks forward to building green – aiming for LEED designations and working towards POE projects, which will generate information and visibility.

This should be happening fairly soon, according to Jennifer Senick who is co-chairing the recently formed Green Building Benefits Consortium (November 2007) with USGBC-NJ chair, Andy Topinka. The new organization is composed of a group of 12

stakeholders – green building owners and operators - who are interested in accomplishing about six case studies in NJ, she said. They are in the process of structuring POE evaluations around the 3 properties built by Mr. Sinclair, with financing and in-kind contributed materials from BASF. All are in Atlantic Highlands on adjacent lots, with similar square footage, setting up “a really nice potential case study design,” Ms. Senick noted. Because more POEs are done in commercial and larger multi- family buildings than single-family residential ones she feels this is an opportunity to gather good information. This kind of available symmetry is very rare in the social sciences, she said. It will give them a good basis for comparison. For the Consortium, 2008 is hoped to be the year of case studies.

Look ahead, Mr. Sinclair’s newest project will be the renovation / restoration of a 100 year old Masonic Lodge in Fair Haven (Monmouth) which will become a Holistic healing center. His first step will be to bring in architects experienced in LEED NC (new construction). “We need to clarify our clients' requests for the project and meet their needs within the parameters of the LEED NC protocol,” he said. With all of this new activity, he is hoping to develop a business platform and plan that will bring his company's building capacity to at least ten homes a year within the next three years.

*Adam Sinclair is now serving as Vice Chair of the Central Jersey Branch of USGBC-NJ working on education and membership. He can be reached at [asinclair@fluidconstruction.com](mailto:asinclair@fluidconstruction.com) or 732.291.1592 with any questions or comments on building green homes.*



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