

Resources for Building Green

by Carl Hagstrom

With more and more product ads touting "environmental friendliness," it's increasingly difficult to separate the truth from the hype. Three publications I recently looked at provide much-needed help for those seeking unbiased sources of benign building products. While all three guides provide information and sources that can help you make sound choices, they fail to recommend specific products. Until there is a standardized method for evaluating products for their environmental suitability, however, this is unlikely to change.

Brief Listings

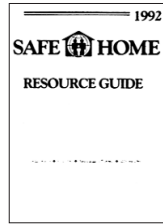
Steve Loken's *Guide to Resource Efficient Building Elements* (Center for Resourceful Building



Technology, P.O. Box 3413, Missoula, MT 59806; 406/549-7678; \$20) is a product directory for residential contractors. The chapters are organized like an estimating system, starting with foundation systems and structural framing and ending with finish materials. While some of the product listings are "old hat" to many builders (two thirds of the chapter on framing, for example, lists manufacturers of laminated veneer lumber and I-joists), there are plenty of listings for products you may not have heard of and sources that are difficult to find. The listings average 100 words, and review the product's environmental qualities.

The introductions to the *Guide* and to each chapter help keep it from reading like a phone directory. You can discover, for example, that in Montana and northern Idaho, the diameter of logged trees at breast height shrank from 17 inches in 1970 to 12 inches in 1984. This helps explain why you haven't gotten a decent 2x12 in quite some time. If you're new to green building and your pocketbook is a little thin, the *Guide to Resource Efficient Building Elements* is your best buy.

Buyer's Guide



The 70-page *Safe Home Resource Guide* (Lloyd Publishing, 24 East Ave., Suite 1300, New Canaan, CT 06840; 203/966-2099;

\$33) covers a much broader base than Loken's publication, with over half of the resources related to building. It serves more as a "buyer's guide," listing companies that offer environmentally responsible products for building,

agriculture, home care, and other fields. Entries include the company's name, address, and phone number, but don't always describe the



products offered. A section on architecture and construction lists organizations, designers, consultants, and other resources who can provide information to builders concerned about the environment.

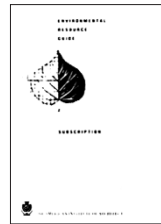
Lloyd Publishing also produces *Safe Home Digest* (\$27.96/yr. for six issues), a bimonthly newsletter, averaging 15 pages, that follows the same subject format as the *Resource Guide*. Its reports on environmental issues will help you make and support sensible product choices. A recent article on carpet, for instance, discusses the issue of offgassing. After acknowledging that "carpet routinely contains and offgasses benzene, toluene, xylene, styrene, and 4-phenylcyclohexene," the *Digest* questions the carpet industry's claims that "simple, adequate ventilation usually alleviates problems caused by high concentrations of such substances." These quotes would be useful to a customer who insists on synthetic carpet in a tightly constructed new home. I'd recommend both the *Digest* and the newsletter for those who want to keep up-to-date on environmental building issues. The publication is well worth its modest cost.

In-Depth Coverage

The *Environmental Resource Guide* (AIA/ERG Project, 1735 New York Ave., NW, Washington, DC 20006, 800/365-2724) is a subscription service created by the AIA Committee on the Environment.

The ERG is published in a

three-ring binder and updated quarterly. Tabbed section headings divide articles by topic, including site design and land use,



energy, tropical rain forests, recycling, and building ecology. The Case Studies/Reports section gives examples of environmentally sensitive strategies and examines a number of ongoing construction projects in which these strategies are being applied.

Under the "Materials" subheading of the Environmental Topics section, a number of individual building materials are examined in depth. The even-handed reports present the perspectives of both industry and environmental groups and make a good effort to separate fact from fiction. The analysis of particle board in the first issue, for example, spans 13 pages and describes its construction, use, and maintenance, as well as issues regarding its disposal, recycling, and reuse. The analysis also includes a discussion of the waste produced and the energy consumed at each stage in the process and devotes two full pages to the issue of indoor air quality.

A comprehensive 15-page reference section at the end of the guide gives bibliographical information and lists names and addresses of environmental, scientific, and other groups. The subscription cost of \$200 per year for non-AIA members (\$125 for members) is steep, but the *Environmental Resource Guide* is the publication of choice for those who are seriously pursuing environmentally responsible building practices. ■

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