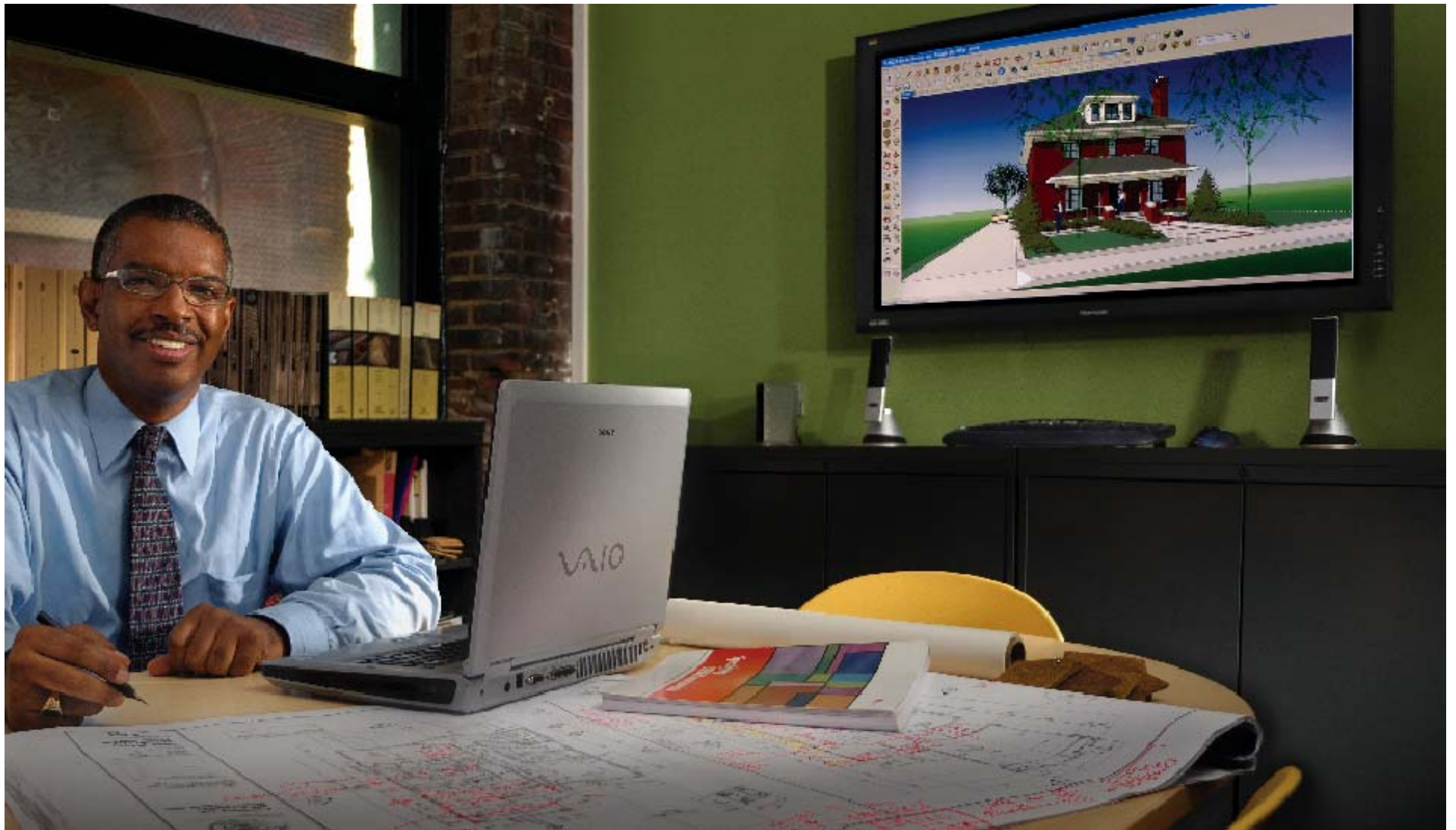


POSTED ON SEPTEMBER 1, 2006:

The Green House Effects

By Sarah Galpern



Hidden beneath the canopy of trees that shades the Evergreen Historic District, something fairly unusual in Midtown Memphis is discreetly taking place. Among some of the city's oldest homes, architect Jimmie Tucker and his crew are building a brand-new house.

Yet the traditional, red-brick three-bedroom residence at 1634 North Parkway is not just a new house. It is a new *kind* of house. Tucker is an advocate of a construction program called EcoBUILD, following the movement started by developer Henry Turley and MLGW in 2003. Turley wanted to ensure that low-income housing in his new development, Uptown, would be energy efficient. MLGW gathered a team of architects, engineers, and representatives from various city agencies and created standards that would deliver 30 percent energy savings over the typical construction of a new residence.

"New does not guarantee efficiency," insists Becky Williamson, strategic marketing coordinator for MLGW. "Shelby County still builds houses to the 1992 model energy code, so we're 14 years behind the times. Shelby County just updated their construction codes, but they opted not to update the energy portion of it, and just essentially elected to say, 'Well, too bad, homeowner. It's your utility bill; you're stuck with it.'"

Stuck with a notoriously *high* bill, which, according to Williamson, can be lowered by taking "seemingly minor steps that collectively have a large impact on energy use, as well as occupant comfort and air quality."

Behind the walls of an EcoBUILD house, you can't see the meticulously insulated roof or the sealed electrical penetrations that make Tucker's home unlike any other in the neighborhood. And you won't find new paint smells or drafty, dusty air, either. The EcoBUILD standards mandate the use of low-volatile organic compounds, eliminating the common odor of what Williamson explains are actually "chemical pollutants" in normal wet paint. MLGW has also tackled the problem of duct leakage, the source of dirty air in many homes throughout Memphis, by making sure that every nook and cranny behind the walls has been sealed with caulk. Builders who choose EcoBUILD will essentially create an airtight, UV-ray protected, Mother Nature-friendly living space that is easy on the lungs, the environment, and the pocketbook.

Well, almost. Because of the EcoBUILD standards, homeowners see a small increase -- approximately 3 percent -- in the initial cost of construction. But considering the final outcome, that could be a small price to pay for reduced energy output.

"There's not a guaranteed return, but we know there's a return," Williamson claims. Because the program is new, MLGW can't provide reliable numbers yet. And the program's newness poses another problem: convincing the construction industry to accept change. However, as consumers and builders become more aware of EcoBUILD's benefits, MLGW anticipates a much higher demand for the use of its standards.

With existing homes, environmentally friendly improvements can also be made without the use of EcoBUILD. Williamson recommends several tools on the MLGW Web site, such as the Energy Savings Calculator, a gadget that enables users to determine the operating costs of their existing appliances and the potential savings they would achieve with newer models. MLGW also offers The Energy Doctor, an energy technician that makes free house calls.

But with new homes, Tucker has found that EcoBUILD offers a greater level of quality control. "We're really expecting that it will pay off, in cutting down on energy loss and just having a more comfortable environment within the interior of the house," says Tucker. He plans to implement the standards into his newest development, because "we think it all makes sense." M

URL for this story: <http://www.memphismagazine.com/gyrobase/Content?oid=1341196>