

S.F. hotel's green effort puts it ahead of crowd

San Francisco Business Times - July 7, 2006

by [Ryan Tate](#)

For evidence that ecologically sensitive development has become commonplace, look no further than the **Orchard Garden Hotel**.

When the boutique lodge was conceived in November 2004, the construction team thought it could be the first hotel in the country to earn a coveted Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design certification from the Green Building Council.

A year and a half later, it is racing merely to be the first LEED-certified hotel on the West Coast, competing with a hotel in Vancouver, Wash.

The hotel's managers once worried they would run far over budget thanks to exotic "green" building materials -- like fly-ash concrete, certified wood and special electrical controls. But obtaining those materials proved to be a walk in the park compared with traditional supplies like concrete and steel, whose skyrocketing cost made the extra price of green materials seem like a rounding error.

All told, the hotel will cost \$17.5 million to build, while a further \$6.5 million was spent to acquire the land, entitlements and other miscellaneous costs.

Orchard Garden's general manager, Stefan Mühle, said one of his biggest challenges is simply sifting through a large pile of marketing materials from all the groups wanting to certify that his hotel is somehow "green."

Mühle doesn't see much point in hyping his hotel's "green" credentials. After all, everyone seems to be doing green -- Kimpton even has a hotel right across the street with special green certification from the California Integrated Waste Management Board.

"In the hotel business, it's going to have to become a way of doing business," Mühle said. "We are trying to be subtle and elegant about the whole thing."

Although environmental sensitivity has become common in the hotel business, the Orchard Garden remains a landmark achievement. Unlike other green-aspiring hotels around town, it was built from the ground up to be eco-friendly, including construction and building materials. And though not the first, the Orchard Garden will be one of just a handful of hotels in the U.S. with LEED certification, and the only in the city.

The building's environmental credentials start with its frame, including wood and concrete. The wood is certified by the Forest Stewardship Council as harvested in a sustainable way. The concrete is made by recycling coal byproduct fly ash.

Then there's the building facade. Large windows and a skylight are designed to cut the use of artificial light and thus save on electricity.

The glass on the windows has a microscopic coating of metal oxide designed to keep heat inside the hotel, boosting energy efficiency, at least during the cool periods that predominate in San Francisco. If it gets too warm inside, a heat exchanger on the outside of the building exposes water to the cool outside air and recirculates it inside the hotel, providing an efficient form of air conditioning.

The heat exchanger cost \$30,000 but is expected to save at least \$1,000 per month in electricity cost.

Inside the hotel, rooms are wired to conserve electricity. Mühle wanted electricity and air conditioning available only with the use of a guest keycard, a setup common in other countries. That way, when the guest leaves the room, all systems are automatically shut off, conserving electricity.

Importing a British-built system proved cost prohibitive, so Mühle worked with a green building team at Swinterton Builders to come up with their own system. At roughly \$30,000, it cost one third of what the British system would have cost and is far easier to maintain. It is expected to trim energy use 20 percent and thus pay for itself within 18 months.

Room interiors presented a special challenge. Green consumer furnishings like carpet, wall treatments and bedding are typically designed to minimize the use of chemicals and synthetics. But this often comes at the expense of durability, and hotel furnishings need to be much more durable than home furnishings due to the high traffic and more frequent cleanings.

The Orchard Garden worked with San Francisco-based **Luna Textiles** to come up with coverlets, drapes, upholstery and shower curtains made with recycled polyester and other textiles made without toxic chemicals. Carpet from Bentley Prince Street of Los Angeles is designed to have low chemical emissions.

Water faucets in the bathroom will emit water at a lower rate, making them "low-flow." All paper in the room, like the materials used in the hotel's executive office, is 100 percent recycled, and printing is done with environmentally friendly ink.

Not the bleeding edge

The hotel is walking a fine line. On the one hand, Mühle acknowledged management is counting on the LEED certification to help the small boutique hotel stand out in a crowded

market. On the other hand, there are dangers is overemphasizing the hotel's green credentials.

Some guests still associate environmentally friendly products with dirt and discomfort, a throwback to early green products of 30 years ago. Meanwhile, cutting-edge environmentalists have higher and higher expectations every year, and the Orchard Garden is not looking to be on the bleeding edge of eco-friendliness.

Management decided to stick with traditional vinyl wallpaper, for example, since it is highly washable and the greener alternatives remain unproven. There are also no solar panels or windmills powering the hotel. And while guests are given the option to reuse their own towels and linens, there is always the option of having them cleaned.

You don't want to come across as a cheapskate -- these people are paying hundreds of dollars for guest rooms," said Mühle.

Mühle and others involved in the project emphasized that the hotel aims to provide world-class hospitality first and foremost, and eco-sensitivity when it does not undermine that goal.

"We didn't try to look green, we tried to look beautiful," said Sherry Caplan, part of the hotel design team with Architecture-International. "What I like about the commitment of the Orchard is to really make it a healthier building because it benefits the guest and the employees."

Indeed, the hotel features organic cleaning products that are not only less harsh than traditional cleaners but, after some trial and error, have proven to be just as effective, meaning the cleaning staff is not having to use extra elbow grease.

The hotel is not slated to open until September. In the meantime, Mühle has other challenges. Of the marketing materials Mühle is currently sifting through from a bewildering array of organizations that want to certify the hotel, some are legit, some are borderline and some seem little more than marketing schemes, he said.

To maintain focus, he simply asks whether a particular certification -- or any other marketing or design decision -- will help him better serve his hotel guests.

"I don't want it to be about gimmicks," Mühle said.

Ryan Tate covers hospitality for the San Francisco Business Times.