



The first ever Attainable LI design competition a success

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By Vince Capogna, USGBC

My wife, Barbara, received "The Cupcake Diaries" for Christmas from our youngest son. It is the story of two sisters, Sophie and Katherine, and their rise from relative unknown to superstardom (see the hit series D.C. Cupcakes on TLC). In addition to the endearing stories, the book is filled with recipes from their award winning bakery. While Barbara devoured the book, I have been devouring the product of each new cupcake recipe that she has experimented with. Though admittedly not nearly as perfectly turned out as the original, these recipes have yielded some of the best cupcakes I have ever tasted.

Last month close to two hundred people filled the ballroom at The Carlyle overlooking Bethpage golf course to applaud the winners of the first ever Attainable LI design competition. Everyone looked forward to hearing and seeing what the award winning recipes for affordable and sustainable (ergo, Attainable) single family residential design looked like. The evening was an upbeat celebration of what is possible when passion and talent come together for an important cause. It was wonderful to hear grand prize winner, Jeremy Schilcher of Urban Green Designs, Ltd., speak about how his entire architectural practice is dedicated to achieving the tenets set out in our competition.

The mission of the Attainable LI partnership between USGBC-LI and United Way of Long Island is to transform the way homes are built and move toward constructing LEED-certified, environmentally responsible housing that is financially attainable, durable, energy-efficient and healthy to live in. The Attainable housing movement is a grassroots effort to combine affordable and sustainable initiatives to provide responsible housing solutions that are replicable in mature suburban communities throughout the nation.

It is not enough to build homes that are "affordable" to buy; they need to be affordable to live in. What good is it to purchase an "affordable" home, which may have sacrificed quality for "affordability," when the monthly heating, cooling, lighting and maintenance costs are prohibitively expensive? Shouldn't affordable really mean that the monthly living expenses are reduced to a level that is manageable for a family of limited means? Can a house really be dubbed "affordable" when it leaks energy like a sieve and the occupants struggle to pay their monthly heating bill? Poor and minority communities seem to be suffering a disproportionate amount of respiratory diseases. The unhealthy environment penalizes those that can least afford it. Living in an affordable home that is constructed so as to create a more healthful living environment makes sense - not only socially but economically. Reducing the frequency of doctor visits and pharmaceutical purchases is a more 'affordable' by product of living in a healthier environment as is the reduction in missed school, unpaid sick days and the continued ability to earn a pay check. Living in a home that was designed, constructed, independently reviewed and tested for durability is far more affordable than chasing after continuous repair and maintenance needs.

Our competition required that the designs be affordable (under \$185,000 total construction cost), but it also required much more. Each home was designed to be energy and water efficient, durable, healthy and easily replicable in any suburban neighborhood using basic construction knowledge and common tools. The winning design will be constructed this year on a property donated by the Town of Babylon and the full set of construction documents will be made available as an open-source document for all to use. It is our greatest hope that this design and that of the many other notable entries becomes the recipe by which all affordable housing is constructed hereafter.

Our sincerest thanks to all the competitors that endeavored to prove that affordability and sustainability need not be mutually exclusive and that the goal of truly affordable/sustainable housing is attainable.

Vince Capogna, LEED AP, is the executive director of US Green Building Council - Long Island and principal of Synergy Green Building Group, Inc., New Hyde Park, N.Y. Vince Capogna, Synergy Green Building Group

New York Real Estate Journal - 17 Accord Park Drive #207, Norwell MA 02061 - (781) 878-4540