

## Condo Living / Calgary

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### ARTICLE

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#### Living green without going broke

**Does death to the economy equal death to the green movement?**

L. Sara Bysterveld



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With the economic slowdown all over the media, it can be hard to focus on the environment.

It may be easy to buy organic and upgrade to high efficiency when times are good, but all signs point to a conservative budget when the going gets tough. But could living an earth-friendly lifestyle and pinching pennies actually be perfectly compatible?

For homebuyers on a budget, the environment may be relatively low on the priority list. Luckily, there are steps that homeowners can take to shrink their carbon footprint, use less water and reduce waste while also leaving more in the bank account.

"When everyone is out making money, they say, 'What's the problem?,'" says John Brown, founder of Slow Home (<http://www.theslowhome.com>). "Easy money, easy everything have led to the trouble we're in."

"I think the good part of what's going on right now is that it has drastically slowed down a lot of...unsustainable practices."

Brown believes that it is possible for people to save money, reduce their impact on the earth and improve their quality of life all at once, even in rough times. His first step toward these goals is to choose a more modest house.

The three tenets of the Slow Home movement (which is somewhat modeled after the Slow Food movement and seeks to create "real alternatives to the standardized world of cookie cutter suburban sprawl") are Simple, Open and Light. They dictate that you can recreate your space simply by working with what you have (Simple); that homebuyers should choose a home that is the right size for their needs, maximizes available daylight and ventilation, and features an open layout (Open); and that it is best to live in a home one can afford without stress and that is well situated to allow residents to walk to their job and necessary amenities (Light).

Brown's advice for people living in a home that they do not feel meets these criteria? "We've been so attuned to thinking that we can buy our way out of a problem. It's not about coming up with new alternatives but what we can do with what we've got. Make the best of where you are."

To help with this goal, the Slow Home website offers a free 'Design School' through its blog. Slow Home also offers regular seminars and presentations for the public. See the website for more information.

Beyond just living simply, there are ways to make a home more efficient and therefore save money, whether building new or renovating. This doesn't have to mean buying all new appliances or solar panels, though if you have the money to invest, those wouldn't be bad investments.

The Riverdale Net Zero House by Habitat Studio showcases many of these options. Located in Edmonton's river valley, the striking duplex is part of the CMHC's EQUilibrium Sustainable Housing Demonstration Initiative, a program which "brings the private and public sectors together to develop homes that combine resource- and energy-efficient technologies with renewable energy technologies in order to reduce their environmental impact" (CMHC website).

Though it would cost a considerable amount to implement all the technologies incorporated into the home, which include active solar water heating and solar electricity, Habitat Studio VP and senior designer Trevor Hoover pinpoints a few that would greatly increase the efficiency of a home with only a small increase in cost.

Hoover estimates that a home could reach 75-80 per cent energy efficiency (he estimates the average new home to be somewhere around 60 per cent) with only an 8-10 per cent higher cost. The elements needed to achieve this include thicker outside walls, an air-tight vapour barrier and taking advantage of the sun using passive solar gain.

One builder that is working to "build green" is Homes by Avi. Ron Isaac, product development designer with Homes by Avi concurs with Hoover's assertion that simple changes that cost relatively little can save buyers a lot. Isaac is referring to features such as a high efficiency furnace and low-E windows. He points out that although these features may tack a few thousand dollars onto a mortgage, this does not make much of a difference to a monthly mortgage payment and should save considerably more in energy payments.

David Bengert, president of Built Green™ Society of Canada and director of purchasing with Jayman MasterBuilt, agrees, adding that breaking it down into a monthly cost/savings comparison is a valuable exercise for homebuyers. He explains that all registered BuiltGreen builders utilize the Energuide rating, and that the Energuide software, a third-party program from the federal government, has the ability to calculate energy savings based on the addition or subtraction of different components—something buyers should be taking advantage of.

In all decisions, especially those directly concerning one's home, there is an aspect of quality of life. Conrad Nobert, co-owner of another Habitat Studio-built net-zero house in Edmonton ([greenedmonton.ca/MillCreekNetZeroHome](http://greenedmonton.ca/MillCreekNetZeroHome)), along with his family, has made very careful considerations around quality of life in all his life decisions, and leads a different lifestyle than most—one that Nobert contends is probably also much happier than most.

Though Nobert and his wife own no car and no cell phones and do not subscribe to cable, he explains that they also have more time.

"You are sacrificing material things but gaining things that are much more important," he says. "Even though we spend less than most people, we have a better quality of life."

Nobert feels it is a myth that eco-friendly living is expensive, and that it can in fact save people a lot of money. He challenges two-car households to get rid of one car and see how much money it saves them and how much simpler their lifestyle can be. Part of this equation involves living in a walkable area, near work, amenities and recreational pursuits.

Calgary eco-coach Lauren Mangion echoes Nobert's sentiment of weighing cost against quality of life. Mangion, who teaches individuals and families how to green their homes through her company Conscious Home, says that when it comes to health especially, benefits often outweigh the costs. This includes using materials that are lower in chemicals, such as paints, flooring and cleaners.

Building green to the benefit of your wallet—it could be the way of the future. CL