



Interview with a Green Builder

By
Earth Day Network

The following interview involves Monica Gilchrest, a Santa Monica resident who has been instrumental in establishing Global Green's Green Building Resource Center (<http://www.globalgreen.org/gbrc/index.htm>). In this interview, Ms. Gilchrest discusses what constitutes a green building, offers tips for making your school greener, and appraises the direction of the sustainable building movement. This interview should serve as both a guide for those wanting to learn more about the green building movement, as well as a framework for developing an introductory lesson plan on green building. The questions and interview were facilitated by EDN's Director of Education.

Q. "What is a Green Building?"

A. "Due to the many different approaches when it comes to green buildings, the true definition of a green building varies depending upon the person asked. Many certified green buildings have a Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certificate that signifies that they have reduced operating costs, healthier inhabitants, and conserve natural resources. However, even though many green buildings have an LEED certificate, there are also plenty of homeowners who have green houses that are energy efficient and use natural and renewable building materials. Yet, they are not LEED certified. To illustrate, a green building can become less "green," if it is 60 miles out in a rural area. But, a city-dweller's building with only some green elements can actually be "greener" than the rural example, because of the inherent costs (both economic and environmental) associated with non-urban areas. Basically, it depends on the given situation, location, and available accommodations to make your building, a green one."

Q. "How do I make my school green? Or, what are some steps that I can take to create a greener school?"

A. "The process of making a school green comes about in a series of seemingly small, yet very significant steps. First, you can start by investing in more products that are made locally. Generally in America, there is an understanding that if a manufactured good is available for the consumer to purchase, then it must be healthy and environmentally friendly. However, since there are no federal standards required to be placed on consumer products, we rely on the companies themselves to register their products as environmentally friendly, and therefore, this mindset is often flawed. The alternative

option though is to invest in locally made and installed products. For example, the Santa Monica area has local tile makers, which even though they are not sold as “green,” actually are because of their diminished reliance on toxic products and lower transportation costs.”

“In addition, there are other small steps that can be taken to make schools more environmentally friendly, such as using different materials when painting or putting in flooring. Conserving energy can be very low cost and requires small measures such as cleaning gutter systems and appliances, as well as setting thermostats higher or lower (depending on the season). Like energy conservation, water conservation is also low cost and can be effective by using waterless urinals and ultra low flush or dual flush toilets. There are even a number of utilities that will offer rebates for investing in cost effective products. Ultimately, these new alternatives are both healthier and more environmentally friendly than the common old practices. In essence, utilizing better materials is the first place to start, such as the examination of your flooring situation and subsequent removal or replacement of carpet with a nontoxic, recyclable, and nontoxic glue version.”

Q. “Tell us about your background. How did you become interested in green building?”

A. Well, I have a Masters in Urban Planning from the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA). However, I did not becoming involved in the environmental industry until twelve years ago, when I was looking to remodel a home that I had just purchased. This was shortly after having my first daughter, and I wanted to use non-toxic products in the remodeling process. Many of our common environmental problems such as walking in Los Angeles stem from poor planning, and due to the dangers of the poor planning, I felt the need to address these issues. (At this very moment in our conversation, Ms. Gilcrest was literally trying to walk and push her baby’s stroller down the street, when all I could hear on the other end, was the unnaturally obnoxious noise of motor vehicles. She emphatically restated the lack of just being able to walk down the sidewalk with your child. No crosswalk signals were apparent, she said, and the reality of the situation struck this interviewer as I conversed with a mother and her child caught in today’s battle between foot versus car “traffic.”) But back twelve years ago, the cost premium for such a remodeling job was really high, and they (the products) were not local. This is changing now in Los Angeles and nationally.”

Q. “This leads us to the status of green building in the United States”-

A. “With the price of energy increasing and people becoming more aware of key concerns such as global warming, green issues are becoming more of a critical topic in today’s society. Three years ago, Global Green opened their green building resource center in Santa Monica, and at the beginning, a lot of their work consisted of merely preaching to people about the necessity of more green buildings. Today, however, more and more people are walking in or calling the center with an eagerness to learn about sustainable topics and/or go “green.” This is because the demand has increased. Along with the shift in the public, the United States Green Building Council’s (USGBC)

Conference has also shifted from the cutting edge to now collaborating with everyone – even investment bankers. The last integral step taken was the improvements in policy and legislation, especially in places like the District of Columbia, Los Angeles, and New Orleans, where such efforts have been solidified in the past three years.”

Q. “What is the status of green building on an International Level?”

A. “Internationally, many regions are taking steps to create a healthier future, but having full cooperation under the green movement requires more action by countries like America, who much of the world views as a “leader.” However, many other places are building a greener livelihood in comparison to America. For example, in Europe, there is more of an emphasis on energy efficiency and health compared with that in America. Also, in places like China, they have realized their future and the role that they must play in order to make it a more positive one. As a result, the government is now sponsoring research and initiatives to promote a healthier environment. In Mexico as well, there is also a green building council that is working toward the same positive, future goal. With American-styled development becoming more widespread though, many countries are still looking toward America and expecting us to be the leader in the environmental movement.”

Q. “What about low-income efforts? A common (mis)conception of green buildings is an investment firm’s office in Manhattan going green. Are there any efforts that address low-income green building?”

A. “Low-income efforts are frequently overlooked in the world today, but there are affordable green housing options. Work is continuously being done with non-profit housing groups in order to make housing as low-cost and green as possible. While low-income green housing is done with both local contractors and legislatures, there are many problems in making it extremely low cost, since typically, the green market is aimed at the higher designer end. Therefore, it is difficult when individuals rather than companies come in (to the center) and want to make a green building, but keeping them within their own budgetary limits is often difficult. Providing low-income green housing is improving though, and New Orleans is a good example of where the low-income green housing initiative is moving in a positive direction.”

Q. “Where should one go for green building materials, guides, and/or more information?”

A. “There is a growing network of regional organizations that offer green housing material and information on how to go about making a green home. For example, there is my organization based in Los Angeles and New Orleans, while in places like Northern California there is the organization Build It Green (www.builditgreen.org). Although there is an emerging network of places to go, there are still not enough organizations based everywhere, but every contractor can still learn to do it because both the know-how and materials are accessible through the internet. Also, there is a domino effect, and as people become willing to improve the future by making housing green, more and more

will in turn join in as well. All it takes is one or two people who know how to do it and are willing to teach others locally.”

Q. “Any last thoughts or comments you would like share, possibly one for teachers?”

A. “At first, I did not see a connection between students and a healthier future, but in working with students, I have realized the necessity of having them involved as well. There is a lot of informing and innovating to be done, and kids provide a lot of ideas that can work. They are the future, so we must work with them now in order to have sustainable tomorrow. Organizations such as www.green.org and the United States Green Building Council (USGBC) (www.usgbc.org) have come out with programs that promote the importance of informing the youth on how to improve the future.”

EDN would like to thank Monica Gilchrest for her participation in this interview. For more information on adopting green building methods at your school or in your curriculum, visit EDN’s [Teacher's Corner](#). Any questions or comments can be directed to EDN’s Director of Education at education@earthday.net.