

# Is it Time for a Voluntary (Consumer-Oriented) Building Code?

---

Dorit Fromm

Everyone should be able to live in a house that is accessible, that is affordable to heat and cool, that is safe and durable, and that can be easily modified for additions or for aging in place. California's building code is the legal document that sets the bar—at a basic and some would say minimal level—toward these housing goals. Yet California is challenged with depleting resources, high housing costs, large population growth, and a significant aging population. We need more than minimal standards. As professionals, we know that green and universal design (going beyond Title 24), thoughtful siting, the use of durable materials, and adaptability to readily accommodate additions make sense when considering housing as a decades-long investment. Yet the realities of the marketplace are not geared toward educating consumers on long-term value.

We are now at the low end of a housing cycle that will swing back up. The state is projected to add over 5 million households by 2020, according to California's Department of Housing and Community Development. Roughly 2.5 million housing units would need to be constructed to meet that demand. How can the next decade's housing be a mechanism for addressing California's problems, rather than aggravating the problem?

The path toward more stringent code requirements is not a wise one, especially in these tough economic times. What is needed is a carrot-perspective appeal that clearly shows consumers the value they purchase, rather than a punitive stick aimed at the building industry. Marketing, labeling, and informing consumers have proven to be effective strategies for sustainability—why not expand the idea?

In 1993, a group of architects, building manufacturers, contractors, and environmentalists wanted to promote green building and move an industry towards more sustainable thinking. They created the nonprofit U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC), and, as a non-government organization run by volunteers, it began with small steps. They released a pilot certification program in 1998 called LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design). A total of fourteen



buildings were certified. They tinkered with it, making revisions, coordinating information from many sources, and now the voluntary LEED certification has become an industry standard, so much so that not only the building industry, but also retailers and other businesses are getting on board. LEED criteria have now been developed for homes, with inspectors contracted by the USGBC.

Last year, a study by CoStar Group found that green buildings outperform similar non-green buildings in sale and rental rates, as well as occupancy, sometimes by very wide margins. In addition to cost savings reaped over time by using sustainable design, the certification has created a strong economic reason for industry to develop green buildings. Much of the credit for this sea change goes to consumer pressure.

Yet sustainability is only one of a number of issues our housing should be addressing. The coming wave of aging Boomers brings with them their own sustainability needs—for accessible housing that is easily adapted as they age. With one out of five Californians

a senior by 2030 and well over 85% of them interested in staying in their homes, there will be large implications for the housing industry.

Some entrepreneurs have already stepped in to address the obvious design issues. “The swell of Baby Boomers nearing retirement age is upon us,” notes Todd Murch, President and CEO of Eskaton, a leading area provider of senior residences and services. “We have a vision about how to serve seniors—and it requires partnership with builders.” His organization has developed the Eskaton Certified Home Program, which specifies 140 design standards to create senior-friendly housing. Taking best practices from a number of sources and incorporating universal design components, they applied them to senior needs. The program allows homebuilders to use their own plans while integrating the Eskaton requirements. License and certification costs start at \$1,200 to \$1,500 a home, and builders can advertise their homes as meeting the special Eskaton requirements.

Aside from green and aging issues, a

number of organizations provide their own criteria for housing—security, for example. There is no shortage of criteria, but the result is an over-abundance of suggestions, and overall they hold little sway over the public.

The Netherlands faced this problem, and looking at their solution can help in articulating a comprehensive approach for California. The Dutch, as well as many other European countries, are facing a large aging demographic. About fifteen years ago, the growing needs of seniors were not receiving much attention by the building industry, so Dutch organizations for the elderly itemized the qualities that would help aging residents. “Several quality labels arose but, unfortunately, these overlapped or even opposed each other,” explains Dr. Englebort, who is head of the WoonKeur Certificate program. Instead of a variety of requirements from interest groups, and to make it easier for the consumer, one “Label for Living” (WoonKeur in Dutch) was created that combines and simplifies a number of different needs. The certificate was developed



by involving consumer groups, housing organizations, elderly associations, for-profit and nonprofit developers, architects, and others, incorporating a wide number of criteria such as universal design and those of the police, in a clear, simple, and straightforward manner.

The beauty of this label is that it isn't just for the elderly or aimed at any one group. The goal is to create a truly functional house; the label describes functionality and then translates the requirements into technical criteria. "All functions must be accessible, adaptable, safe, and user-friendly," explains Dr. Englebert. WoonKeur is supported by the Dutch Ministry of Housing but is a voluntary "second" building code. The Dutch, of course, have a building code in place that sets minimum standards. The WoonKeur provides standards above the minimum for the safe, efficient, and comfortable use of the dwelling over time. When builders choose to incorporate these extra criteria, they receive a certification that consumers look for when purchasing housing. The builder's cost to meet the WoonKeur label

averages from 2000 to 2500 euros extra per new dwelling, or roughly 40 to 50 euros a year over the fifty-year lifetime of the building.

Clearly, the market for housing is not strong to begin with, and adding costs, even if it results in a better product, would not make sense at this time. But I would argue that this is exactly the moment when the housing industry is seeking new directions and recalcitrant consumers need greater assurances. Let's begin the discussion together of figuring out how to create greater value through adopting a voluntary label. Acceptance by the public is key, and education is important. This is an active way for consumers and the housing industry to work towards better housing and a better California. ●

*Editor's note: Dorit Fromm is also a contributor to the forthcoming, second quarter 2009 edition of arcCA on "Design for Aging."*