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A new style of green

Article by: LYNN UNDERWOOD, Star Tribune Updated: February 28, 2011 - 10:21 AM

The eco-friendly Dream Home combines high-tech, energy-efficient features with down-to-earth design.

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With its quaint front porch and gabled roof, the traditional house looks right at home in its Golden Valley neighborhood. But unlike the houses next door, it's heated and cooled by a geothermal system and powered by the sun.

"I wanted to build a 'Leave It to Beaver' house that uses near-zero energy," said Rocky DiGiacomo, owner of DiGiacomo Homes and Renovation in Minnetonka.

The eco-friendly house is one of three Dream Homes open for tours during the Parade of Homes, which begins Saturday.

DiGiacomo said he built the \$1.3 million spec home as a sort of classroom, to teach visitors about energy-efficient systems that can produce as much electricity as a home uses. But he also had another goal: to demonstrate that green technologies don't have to detract from a home's aesthetic.

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"Many clients think green is ugly solar panels in front of the house," said DiGiacomo. "A lot of the green technologies are hidden under the hood."

For example, DiGiacomo designed the roof to conceal the 22 solar

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The green Dream Home was designed by architect Ryan Fish of U+B Architecture & Design.

Paul Markert, Handout photo SPRING PARADE OF HOMES

What: More than 340 new Twin Cities model homes, many of which are furnished and decorated, will be open for tours.

When: Noon to 6 p.m. Thursdays through Sundays, March 5 to April 3.

Events: Free home-buying, building and design seminars.

Admission: Free, except for the three Dream Homes, which cost \$5 to tour.

Information: Guidebooks are available at Twin Cities Holiday Station Stores and at www.paradeofhomes.org, or

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electric panels that are on the back of the house, which faces south. Other "under the hood" features include wood harvested from sustainably managed forests and spray foam insulation that retains heat. A monitoring system lets the homeowners track energy production.

The 4,200-square-foot house also shows that an energy-efficient design can include the features families want most today -- a mudroom with storage cubbies, a second-floor laundry room, luxe master bath and a butler's pantry off the kitchen.

The main floor's open layout is designed around the kitchen, which makes it well-suited for entertaining large groups or for casual family meals. On the second floor, there's a TV room and four bedrooms, including a master suite.

DiGiacomo admitted that some green-leaning visitors may question the amount of resources that were used to build the generously sized home. But he said its sustainable design makes it better for the environment long-term than a smaller existing home.

"We've been careful with resources used in the initial footprint to build the home," he said. "But the most important factor is eliminating the ongoing footprint, which is the amount of energy required to operate the home for its life."

Of course, energy efficiency comes at a cost. DiGiacomo estimates that the zero-energy features added \$60,000 to the home's overall cost, but he said that figure would be reduced by federal renewable-energy tax credits. Based on the current cost of utility bills, he said the energy-saving upgrades will be paid for within nine years.

DiGiacomo hopes more homeowners will do the math and make the upfront investment to save money on their utility bills -- and minimize damage to the environment.

"We hope people will realize the advantages of zero energy and build new using these systems," he said. "It could rejuvenate the new housing industry in the next decade."

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