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Project Spotlight

Project Spotlight: West Coast Green Shipping Container Show House

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Photo Credit: ecofabulous and Dean
J. Birinyi Photography



For some, hearing that a house is made of reused shipping containers—the giant steel boxes that move from boat to tractor trailer as they shuffle goods around the world—brings a bit of skepticism. But for many attendees at West Coast Green, Sept. 25–27, that perception faded quickly as they toured the spacious, decidedly normal-looking show home made with former containers and appointed with a range of green features.

Harbinger House, designed by The Lawrence Group and featuring interior design by ecofabulous, was made with five shipping containers sourced by SG Blocks. The 1,648-square-foot, two-story project includes two bedrooms, two bathrooms, two balconies, a kitchen, a dining room, a living room, and a study.

Before a line is drawn on paper or a single product is specified, recycled shipping container houses start out as inherently green. Reusing the containers saves the time, energy, and expense of shipping them back to their origin, says SG Blocks. What's more, the conversion to house frame requires 400 kWh of energy per 8,000-pound container, explains David Cross, business development director for SG Blocks, while the other recycling option, melting it down, requires 8,000 kWh.

Beyond reducing the carbon footprint, reusing shipping containers as a structural material brings greater installation speed, says Cross, and strength suitable for earthquake- and hurricane-prone areas.

Cross says one of the challenges is eliminating preconceived notions that this is a low-end solution. But, as he points out, a container cut down for use as the framework of a house is just a steel box truss, and thus merely an instrument used to build. “It’s no more a ‘container’ than a [stick-frame] house is trees,” he says.

Indeed, it didn’t take much to silence any skeptics on the show floor. Michelle Shaw, West Coast Green’s production director & curator of special exhibits, says she heard visitors ask, “Are you sure these are shipping containers?” many times over. “I love the fact that great design can so easily shift someone’s perception,” she says.

The container framework can be finished, inside and out, the same as traditional framing methods, and designs can range from contemporary, like the Harbinger House, to more traditional or regional styles.

Lawrence Group designer Eric Heischmidt, LEED AP, whose design was selected for the show house by West Coast Green following an in-house design charrette, chose to go the modern route to appeal to the coastal California market where the house was being shown.

“I was trying to keep it simple,” he says, “and I thought that the form of the shipping containers lent themselves to a contemporary aesthetic with clean lines.”

Some of the green design elements Heischmidt incorporated include centralized plumbing systems and generous windows for daylighting. He says he tried to use the footprint as economically as possible, keeping large spaces at the front and rear and centralizing utilities so as to minimize circulation area.

The home showcases a range of other eco-friendly features, including:

- ‡ Verve Living Systems whole-house lighting control
- ‡ SilverWalker Studios cabinets
- ‡ Rainscreen Clip FSC siding
- ‡ Woodhaven FSC balconies & decks
- ‡ Wicanders pre-finished engineered cork plank flooring
- ‡ Liberty Valley reclaimed and FSC doors
- ‡ Premier Power solar module, inverter, and meter
- ‡ NCFI InsulStar spray-foam insulation
- ‡ Whirlpool Energy Star-rated refrigerator and dishwasher
- ‡ NanaWall retractable glass wall

- | Teragren pre-finished engineered bamboo flooring
- | Phillips Perfect Colors/C2 Lovo low-VOC paints
- | Modwalls recycled glass tile shower surround and bathroom flooring
- | Vetrazzo recycled glass vanity tops
- | Caroma dual-flush toilets
- | Restoration Timber engineered reclaimed plank hickory flooring
- | James Hardie HardieWrap housewrap; Artisan Matrix Panel and Artisan Lap fiber-cement siding.

Shaw says the show house was designed to cost about \$150 per square foot without a foundation, partially due to some of its higher-end features and finishes. The base model can run as low as \$100 per square foot.

The house earned honorary GreenPoint Rated and LEED for Homes certifications. It will not be able to earn actual certifications until it reaches its final destination.

For more information on shipping containers, visit www.sgblocks.com. For videos and images of the home's construction on the show floor, visit www.westcoastgreen.com and www.ecofabulous.com.