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10 Minutes For The Planet

So-called Green Housing ©

by Valentine Rinner

Hello everyone and welcome to this week's episode of 10 Minutes for the Planet, today we'll take a closer look at eco-construction.

In urban and peri-urban France a large majority of new construction projects may have "eco" or "green" labels or certifications. It's rare to find new residences or apartment complexes without at least patches of grass or a few trees. Green housing seems like a positive marketing message today.

Being a resident in one of these new constructions, it's obvious that for the promoter, the "eco" trend is little more than marketing, as they have managed to make a reasonably-sized garden unappealing. It's not ugly, but it's not welcoming for a sunny hang-out with a book or an impromptu discussion with a neighbour. And I suspect they did that on purpose maybe to perhaps keep down the noise or keep maintenance as low as possible.

My point, however, is that today you can build so-called "green" certified buildings just by checking a few arbitrary boxes on a list: mainly green patches and lower energy consumption. Granted, this is already an improvement on the terrible buildings we inherited from the 1970s, however it's essentially "green washing": meaning it's something being sold at a much higher price because of a feigned environmental friendliness. The clear majority of "green" buildings today are built with materials that are highly polluting and non-recyclable and the industry itself generates tens of millions of kilograms of waste each year. These materials and the logic behind most "green" construction projects are very far from actual environmental concerns.

However, in the recent years in France, we have noticed a growing trend in a different type of eco-construction. Individuals, cooperatives and small local companies are bringing back long forgotten building techniques. These techniques consist in using local materials, mainly straw, mud and wood. It might not sound 100% appealing at first but in fact, these materials have many surprising advantages that industrial means are far from achieving.

Straw bales packed inside walls serve as an ideal thermal and humidity insulator. Mud and wood serve to build solid multi-level structures, floors, walls and ceilings. These materials are so much more efficient that it is said you only need to maintain an inside heat of around 14 or 15 degrees to feel comfortable, compared to the 20 or 21 degrees

required for a concrete house. This difference is due mainly to the natural regulation of humidity by porous walls and the heat they absorb. Low humidity also has the advantage of keeping the materials from rotting, which is a recurrent problem with cement for example.

These natural materials are also cheaper, locally available, and 100% non-polluting and recyclable. So why aren't they more commonly used? Mainly because these sort of construction projects require more manpower. That's why cooperative construction projects are becoming so popular, as an exchange process between individual constructors or organisations are set in place, allowing seekers to receive help, teaching and learning new techniques. If you hear about one of these projects, go spend a sunny Spring day: they're loads of fun and very empowering in terms of skills.

Bye everyone and see you next week for a new episode of 10 Minutes for the Planet.