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The New Trophy Home, Small and Ecological

By [FELICITY BARRINGER](#)

For the high-profile crowd that turned out to celebrate a new home in Venice, Calif., the attraction wasn't just the company and the architectural detail. The house boasted the builders' equivalent of a three-star Michelin rating: a LEED platinum certificate.

The actors [John Cusack](#) and [Pierce Brosnan](#), with his wife, Keely Shaye Smith, a journalist, came last fall to see a house that the builders promised would "emit no harmful gases into the atmosphere," "produce its own energy" and incorporate recycled materials, from concrete to countertops.

Behind the scenes were Tom Schey, a homebuilder in Santa Monica, and his business partner, Kelly Meyer, an environmentalist whose husband, Ron, is the president of Universal Studios. Ms. Meyer said their goal was to show that something energy-conscious "doesn't have to look as if you got it off the bottom shelf of a health-food store."

"It doesn't have to smell like hemp," she said.

That was probably a good thing. The four-bedroom house was for sale, with a \$2.8 million asking price.

Its rating was built into that price. LEED — an acronym for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, is the hot designer label, and platinum is the badge of honor — the top classification given by the U.S. Green Building Council. "There's kind of a green pride, like driving a Prius," said Brenden McEaney, a green building adviser to the city of Santa Monica, adding, "It's spreading all over the place."

Devised eight years ago for the commercial arena, the ratings now cover many things, including schools and retail interiors. But homes are the new frontier.

While other ratings are widely recognized, like the federal Energy Star for appliances, the LEED brand stands apart because of its four-level rankings — certified, silver, gold and platinum — and third-party verification. So far this year, 10,250 new home projects have registered for the council's consideration, compared with 3,100 in 2006, the first year of the pilot home-rating system. Custom-built homes dominate the first batch of certified dwellings. Today, dinner-party bragging rights are likely to include: "Let me tell you about my tankless hot water heater." Or "what's the R value of your insulation?"

But if a platinum ranking is a Prada label for some, for others, it is a prickly hair shirt. Try asking buyers used to conspicuous consumption (a 12,000-square-foot house) to embrace conspicuous nonconsumption (say, 2,400 square feet for a small family). Or to earn points by recycling and weighing all their construction debris (be warned: a bathroom scale probably won't cut it). The imperatives of comfort and eco-friendliness are not always in sync.

For instance, the Brosnans, environmental advocates who admired Ms. Meyer's house, are now building a home of their own and "really want to do it green," said David Hertz, their architect. Mr. Brosnan may adopt many environmentally sound building techniques, but he "is not going to live in a 2,400-square-foot home," the architect said.

Mr. Hertz's complaint goes beyond size. He says the rating system is rigid and cumbersome, something that has been heard across the country as green building slowly ceases to be a do-gooder's hobby. The ratings are now woven into building codes in Los Angeles, Boston and Dallas. The federal government and many states and cities use LEED standards or the equivalent for their own buildings. The system is based on points earned for a variety of eco-friendly practices; builders choose among them, balancing the goals of cost control, design and high point totals.

Nevada, North Carolina and Virginia, not to mention Chicago, Cincinnati and Bar Harbor, Me., give tax incentives or other concessions, like expedited permitting or utility hookups, for construction that is up to the nonprofit council's standards.

And "LEED-accredited professional" is a new occupational status.

Worries about [climate change](#) and rising energy costs are part of the equation: roughly 21 percent of heat-trapping carbon dioxide emissions come from homes; nearly 40 percent come from residential and commercial structures combined. As energy prices rise, the long-range economic value and short-range social cachet of green building are converging.

More than 1,500 commercial buildings and 684 homes have been certified but just 48 homes have received the platinum ranking, among them a four-bedroom home in Freeport, Me., as well as homes in Minneapolis; Callaway, Fla.; Dexter, Mich.; and Paterson, N.J. The checklist for certification can be more daunting than a private-school application, which prompts many to abandon the quest. Mr. Schey is not seeking LEED certification on his next home (though the project's architect, Melinda Gray, is seeking it for hers).

Randy Udall, a builder in Colorado who wrote a piece critical of the process after building two accredited [ski](#) resort additions, said, "You're happy when you're released from the U.S. Green Building Council's Abu Ghraib," though he added, "You typically end up with a delightful building."

One requirement for getting a home certified is hiring an on-site inspector approved by the council to test the new systems and help fill out the huge amount of paperwork, which is reviewed by the nonprofit council. The organization charges from \$400 for a home to \$22,500 for the largest buildings to register and certify costs.

Joel McKellar, a researcher with LS3P Associates, an architecture firm in Charleston, S.C., said that to earn credit for adequate natural light, "you have to calculate the area of the room, the area of the windows, how much visible transmittance of light there is."

Michael Lehrer, who designed the platinum-rated Water + Life Museum complex in Hemet, outside Los Angeles, said, "They have mundane things in there that are pretty nonsensical and others things that are pretty profound." He added, "At a time when everybody and their sister and brother are saying 'We are green,' it's very important that these things be vetted in a credible way."

To cope with the growing appetite for accreditation, the council this spring asked other agencies to help make LEED certifications. A new code, which addresses some of the criticisms, is at www.usgbc.org/DisplayPage.aspx?CMSPageID=1849.

Is LEED a useful selling tool? Offered with great fanfare last fall on [eBay](#) for \$2.8 million, the Meyer/Schey home in Venice, which can be seen on their Web site, www.Project7ten.com got no bids at the time; it recently found a potential buyer, for \$2.5 million.

But Maria Chao, an architect in Amherst, Mass., said her new home's certification rating had meant instant recognition. "This is a small town," Ms. Chao said. "When I mention I live in the house on Snell St., people say, 'Oh, the green home.'"

Frances Anderton, a KCRW radio host and Los Angeles editor of Dwell magazine, longs for the day when LEED recognition is irrelevant. "Architects should be offering a green building service," Ms. Anderton said, "without needing a badge of pride."