

Niche Hills

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE

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THE FUTURE IS NOW!



By Mary Ellen Ternes



The statement “the future is now” has never been more true in the areas of energy, environment and sustainability. Why am I so bold as to venture forth with such a broad assertion (and even an exclamation point)? It’s not my general optimism; I am actually led to this conclusion through my work with industrial, commercial and governmental entities, and involvement with professional associations and academic institutions. My work and professional activities nationally and locally compel me to accept that our present, as we now know it, is already past in many respects – reminding me of the way that Facebook, when we weren’t looking, somehow stopped being a kooky idea and gained more global members than the population of the U.S.

I grew up in Missouri, and believe in showing rather than telling, so let me show you. Over the past year, we’ve been talking about how things are right now – or really, in the recent present. We’ve talked about general sustainable concepts, air quality, water, waste and energy, gardening, our habits, where we were historically and where we are now. In this upcoming year, I’d like to show you where we’re going by describing and taking you to developments as they’re happening now. Perhaps we can all adapt more easily to changes that continue, with or without our awareness, every single day. It’s hard for anyone to keep up!

We'll tour new college majors and fields of study, as well as new types of jobs and entire careers, and new ways of doing long-established jobs. We'll look at new ways of designing government infrastructure, including water and power production as well as distribution. We'll review international efforts to revise standard building codes and new construction methods that maximize energy efficiency, and which, combined with home power generation, might even lead some urban dwellers to set a goal of being a positive energy generator adding power to the grid, rather than an energy user drawing power from the grid. We'll see what industrial engineers and researchers are doing with new chemicals and materials, and ways of producing and storing energy. And we'll review any new legislation that might make its way out of Congress, and consider how we might adapt to that as well.

While our children may want to figure out how to make a living playing PS3 or Wii (especially mine), they currently have more educational choices than ever, which are only growing daily... and I'm not just talking about building wind farms. Right now, our kids can choose classes that would help them become, for example, a city sustainability manager and help cities identify, design and implement ways to eliminate unnecessary waste and save lots of taxpayer dollars. Or they can decide to become energy efficiency experts and promote sustainability by helping minimize waste in energy use, and save us all lots of pass-through costs disguised as taxes or unnecessarily high energy bills.

But aside from completely new opportunities, sustainability concepts are being considered in just about every aspect of our current lives. For example, interior designers now consider "sustainable" design choices – including building materials like recycled glass counters and renewable resources such as bamboo, which can be used for a new floor or a soft, fluffy towel – and can even choose to specialize in "sustainable interior design."

As another example, city planners are learning how to utilize "smart growth" concepts to eliminate urban sprawl; "transit-oriented development" to help encourage public transportation; and "sustainable urban infrastructure" that breaks up centralized power generation and waste water treatment into smaller plants that provide services to smaller areas.

Take this tour with me in the next several months. We need to be prepared, because while most of us were sleeping, the future paid us a visit. At least it left lots of sustainable presents to carry us forward. ■

BE INFORMED

For an in-progress success story in this field, read about OKC's new Sustainability Manager Autumn Radle at www.okc.gov/news/2009_08/Sustainability_Manager_Radle.html. Also, for sustainable education ideas closer to home, see esgp.okstate.edu/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=127&Itemid=65.

To appreciate the bright (yet efficiently cool) careers in energy efficiency, tour the U.S. Department of Energy's Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy website at www.eere.energy.gov. Also, check out the U.S. Chapter of the International Association of Energy Engineers, which has an Oklahoma Chapter focusing on energy efficiency and sustainability, at www.aeecenter.org/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageid=1.

To learn about the world of sustainable interior design, check out the Sustainable Style Foundation at www.sustainablestyle.org/about-ssf. Read about one of OSU's own interior design students' sustainability accomplishments at ches.okstate.edu/documents/April%2007%20News%20of%20Accomplishments.pdf.

To be impressed by every possible aspect of sustainable planning that you didn't know existed, take a look at the website for the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives: iclei-usa.org:10080/mount_iclei/iclei/programs/sustainability and iclei-usa.org:10080/mount_iclei/iclei/success-stories.