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Project puts urban spin on Earth-friendly living

Unique initiative in the Point will make an ecological point

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Henry David Thoreau had it easy.

The U.S. thinker illustrated the benefits of a simplified lifestyle: build a cabin, grow your food and be satisfied with life's necessities.

But fleeing the city for a cabin in the woods is hardly an option anymore - if it ever was. Even in the 19th century, Thoreau was a weirdo who had to completely withdraw from society in order to live the pioneering life. Nowadays, cities are booming; and no matter how much we care about environmental issues or simple living, there is less and less wilderness we can retreat to.

If we're going to deal with these issues, we'll have to deal with them here, where we live.

"There's nothing granola about this," said Rune Kongshaug of Ensemble Terre Ciel. This design group is exploring ways to be environmentally productive in an urban setting.

Its innovative green architecture project, the Maison Productive, has started construction in Point St. Charles. The condo project will use geothermal heating, and offer units that range in size from one to three bedrooms. Pre-sales start soon, and units should be ready by next June.

Kongshaug is aware of the reality of city living, and his project aims to show that housing infrastructure can contribute to the environment instead of being a drain on it. The Maison Productive will be LEED certified, meaning it will be evaluated for the eco-friendliness of its building materials, water usage and design innovations, among other criteria.

The building will also be assessed by the British eco- community development project BedZed, which will help certify it as a zero-emissions project. Part of what it means to be zero emissions is taking into account things like food production. If a living unit can produce some of its food independently, then less of it needs to be shipped from distant locales.

Year-round food production will be enabled through the incorporation of cold frames into the building design. These are essentially mini-greenhouses (wood boxes with a glass or plexiglass lid), that allow the growing season to be extended - even in Montreal's cold climate.

The project also will be experimenting with grey-water filtration. Grey water includes refuse from showers and sinks, which can be filtered and reused to flush toilets and water plants.

Plants in the building will filter this water through their soil, and when the system is

proved safe, it will be incorporated into the water supply. An irrigation tank on the roof will use gravity to irrigate every level of the house.

However, Kongshaug's commitment to avoiding granola extremes means residents will have a choice; once the grey water filtration is approved, they will still be able to use city water if they prefer. But the project will have some rules, like not permitting the use of harmful cleaners.

"The whole system is connected," Kongshaug said. "It doesn't end when you flush the toilet. It takes being conscious that there is a flow here, and we are part of this flow." The units will cost approximately \$250 per square foot. The developers stress this kind of initiative pays off in savings later, such as lower heating bills.

Green architecture gets a lot of press, but it seems that many of those who are putting it into action are upper-class homeowners with money for massive renovations. The Maison Productive, on the other hand, hopes to make green architecture user-friendly and accessible.

We might not be able to escape to the wilderness anymore, but neither do we have to live in self-contained units that feel cut off from the world around us.

"I think this will have a large appeal," Kongshaug said.

"Let's put it on the market, let's make a stink about it, and see how enjoyable an experience it is." For more information, visit www.ensembleterreciel.com

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