

Roof rises on housing's green future

Young developer's West Sac project uses sustainable materials.

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LJ Urban chief Levi Benkert's 15-month-old daughter Ruth seems to share her dad's enthusiasm for the environmentally sustainable West Sacramento homes that Urban unveiled at Saturday's open house.

Levi Benkert, the impossibly young visionary who runs the "eco-urban" development company LJ Urban, is probably smart enough and bold enough to do whatever he wants in business.

His track record indicates he could amass a fortune in real estate and retire with his wife and three kids on some island in the middle of nowhere.

In fact, his life was heading in that direction when Benkert slammed on the brakes, changed his focus and walked away from a real estate career that saw him earn more than \$1 million in a year.

These days, the fresh-faced and friendly Benkert, 26, wants to do something different with his time, money and land-holdings – he wants to change the world.

On Saturday, at an open house for the first completed vertical-style home built on a 1.62-acre site in West Sacramento, Benkert shared his vision of what's to come on this block and perhaps everywhere else in America.

This two-bedroom house, after all, is unlike practically anything else on the Sacramento market.

The prefabricated wooden stairs use 40 percent less lumber, the slats on the window shades are from trees cleared off the site. The kitchen has counters made from recycled paper compressed into granite-hard surfaces.

The windows are "thermally broken" to prevent energy loss. They even made the roof white to reflect heat. The air-conditioning system has a "night breeze" feature, drawing in cool air from outside when the Delta breeze blows. On and on it goes.

A smaller project in midtown called 9 on F – nine vertical homes on F Street – also emphasizes sustainable building materials, but Benkert says his company's West Sacramento 35-house effort goes even further.

Once considered a fringe concept embraced only by New Age hippies, green and sustainable homes may be going mainstream, inspired by a political climate that recently awarded Al Gore a Nobel Peace Prize.

LJ Urban is counting on homebuyers who want their dwellings to reflect their ideals.

Said one open house visitor, Matthew Tomas, 29: "I'm really happy with how they are reusing so many things, right down to the insulation from recycled newspapers."

"They really have a vision for a new style of development, which is a softer touch on the planet," said Craig Stradley, the Magavero Notestine Associates architect who designed the houses.

The open house was also unusual, and that doesn't even count vegan chef Kimba Kabaka serving meals in the single-car garage.

There were no price tags and no sales pitches for the development that Benkert and business partner Micah Baginski began calling the "Good" project. They see their role as educating the consumer, though the first five units will be offered for sale in June.

"These houses aren't for everybody," Benkert said. "We want you to buy this house because you believe in it. We'd rather you go somewhere else if you just want that screamin' deal."

The houses, spaced 39 inches apart, come in sizes XS, S and M, and will start in the mid-\$300,000 range, with floor plans from 1,120 to 1,812 square feet. A sign out front stated, "Dream big, live small."

Benkert has been dreaming big for years. The son of missionaries and home-schooled for most of his life, he arrived in Sacramento as a teenager.

By then, his dad owned a business building rock-climbing walls. The company landed a lucrative job building the massive facility for Sacramento Pipeworks on 16th Street. Levi was the welder.

Coffee-lovers may remember a 19-year-old Benkert serving customers alongside his wife, Jessie, at Izzador's Coffee and Tea on N Street in midtown. According to a 2001 article in The Bee, the couple invested \$30,000 in the business.

"We sold it and started doing real estate," Benkert said.

Then came the bold strokes. In 2002, he got his real estate license and quickly became a top producer with Lyon Real Estate. Benkert bought an \$895,000 home in West Sacramento. It was 6,000 square feet on 5 acres. He got a mortgage without having to document his income and with little idea how he would make the \$5,000 monthly payments.

He formed Asante Homes, divided his land into three lots and sold the house and property separately.

"It was very profitable," he said.

Then he quit, turning his back on a business model that was earning him upward of \$1 million a year.

"I didn't like that we were adding to sprawl," he said. "I just couldn't stand to contribute to something I didn't believe in."

The turning point came when Benkert contacted pal Jason Presley, who was working at Pepperdine University.

"He was one of the smartest, most passionate, most creative people I knew. I hired him because of his genius. I told him to come take a couple of months and then tell me what your job is," Benkert said.

LJ Urban – the "LJ" is for Levi and Jason – was born. Presley lit a fire under urban idealists.

Investors were eager to get on board, too. Benkert says 30 financial backers have infused the company with \$30 million.

As new as it was, LJ Urban became a leader in what Presley called the "eco-urban" way of life, with plans to build 250 homes in the urban core.

Not long after the first concrete slab was poured on the "Good" project, tragedy struck.

First Benkert's older brother, Jonah, committed suicide in late February. A month later, Presley was dead at 36 – the victim of a liver disease.

Devastated, Benkert considered giving up on the company. One day, he went to a quiet spot along the American River and, he says, "I pieced everything together and said, 'OK, you have to keep going.'"

"He's absolutely a visionary," said Baginski, 33. "He grabs an idea and won't stop until everybody in the room is on board."

On Saturday, that idea had a front door, a staircase and a kitchen counter made of recycled paper. In the garage, there was a vegan chef. One visitor was marveling about the insulation made from old newspapers.

On the balcony, Benkert was telling a visitor about all that went into the house and all it stands for.



To say the least, it's a different way of selling homes.

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LJ Urban chief Levi Benkert, left, welcomes Michael Musto to Saturday's open house at the firm's West Sacramento development. The first five units in the project, which heavily emphasizes the use of green, sustainable materials, will go on sale in June. José Luis Villegas / jvillegas@sacbee.com