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Orinda's new City Hall incorporates a variety of design elements that make it very environmentally friendly.

ORINDA

SF Chron 9/5/07

New City Hall is golden

Siegel & Strain's design could earn building top green status from group

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The most novel features in Orinda's new City Hall aren't the cork floor tiles, or the ceiling fans, or the bathroom partitions made of recycled yogurt containers.

What's unique is a series of wall signs that bear the words "open windows." They light up when City Hall's cooling system snaps off, alerting workers to take advantage of the building's potential for natural ventilation.

"It's a social experiment," said Henry Siegel, a partner in Siegel & Strain Architects, the building's designer. "It requires users to interact more with a building than usual."

The signs are part of an aggressive attention to environmental details that is expected to make the 14,000-square-foot structure

the first City Hall in California to win a coveted Gold rating from the U.S. Green Building Council for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design. But Orinda City Hall demonstrates something else as well: how the newfangled craze for sustainability can translate into comfortable, even homey buildings.

When Orinda in early 2004 selected Siegel & Strain to design city offices that emphasized conservation, this affluent Contra Costa suburb was ahead of the curve. In

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Architects Burton Peek Edwards (left) and Henry Siegel check details at the new Orinda City Hall.

City Hall's green features subtle

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creasingly, though, such efforts color all facets of the development landscape — driven in some cases by government edict, in others by the quest for a badge of honor or a marketing tool.

The official push is obvious. In San Francisco, for instance, a mayoral task force recommended this summer that virtually all new commercial buildings by 2012 should be at a LEED Gold standard. At the private level, there are such recent initiatives as the announcement last month by Pinn Brothers Fine Homes that solar panels will adorn the rooftops of the 455 houses Pinn will build in Contra Costa's fast-growing Brentwood community.

At Orinda City Hall, solar panels were trimmed from the \$8 million construction project for budgetary reasons. But the modest two-story structure is shaped by a sustainability ethos that extends beyond specific products or rating

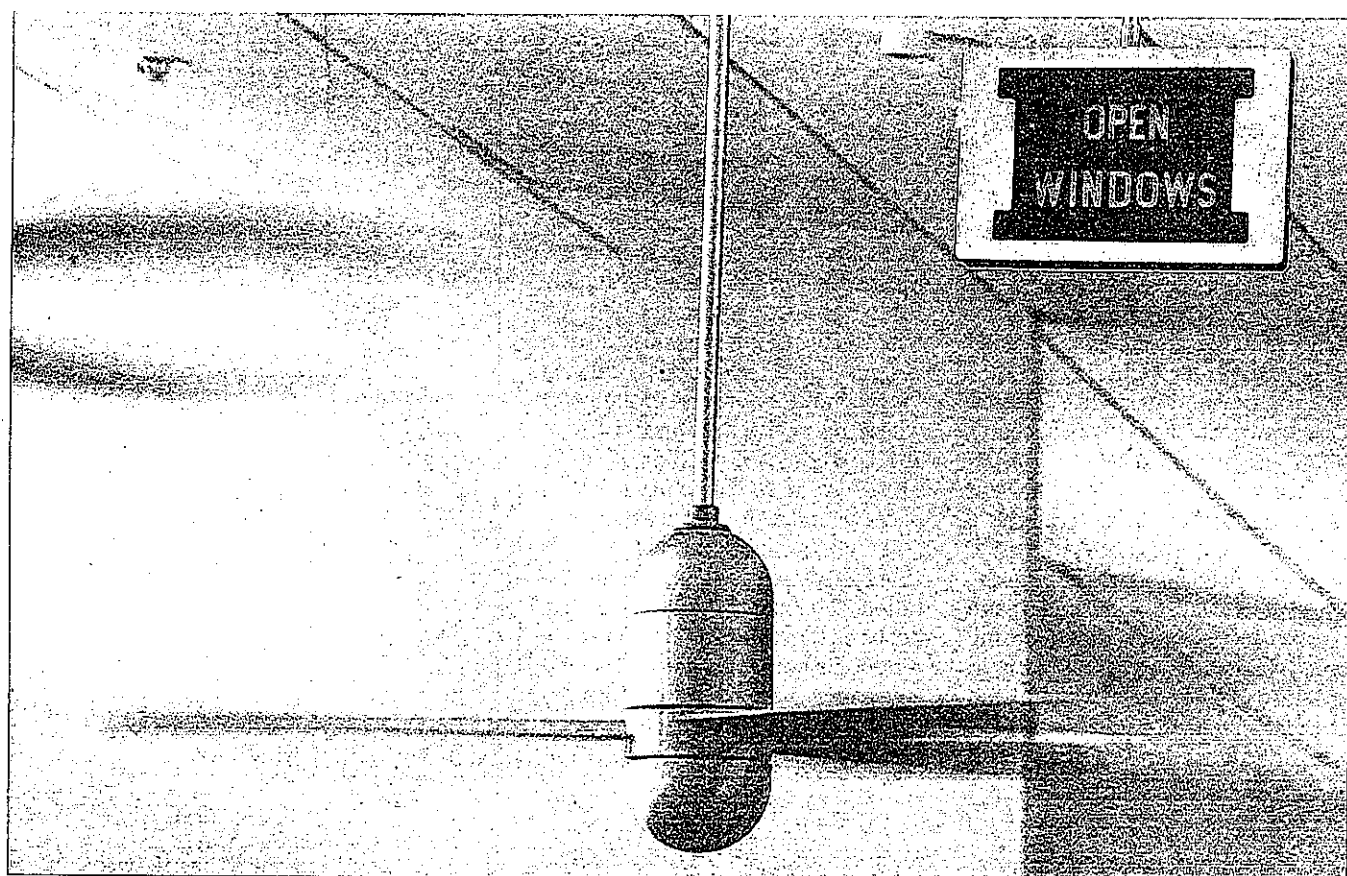
systems.

One of the most profound "green" moves is subtle: The long building nestled against a steep ridge pulls apart in the middle to allow room for a public stairway. The outdoor space serves as the point of entry to all the offices within the building.

Instead of an air-conditioned foyer or atrium, visitors orient themselves outdoors, saving considerable energy. On the bottom level is the building department. The stairway on the upper level passes a community meeting room on one side and the offices for city officials and the Police Department on the other.

Not only is the visually enticing space sheltered from rain or excessive sun by a canopy of fritted glass, the stairway fits into a longer trail connecting the city's library on the west with a hillside neighborhood on the east.

In other respects, the building's look is conventional — a polite modernism where the civic tone is set by forceful structural columns



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Lighted signs tell workers to open a window when it gets too warm and the ventilation system is off.

beneath a rounded roof, with tall windows and red tiles between each column.

The metal sunscreens that form an airy grid on the east-facing facade are the most obvious sustainable stroke. But the curved roof plays the same role by extending far enough to shield the second floor offices. Similarly, the first floor is recessed so that the upstairs offers shade.

"A holistic approach where you consider environmental factors from the start is essential to creating a good green building," Siegel said. "You can't simply design what you want and then talk to your mechanical engineer about how to make it work."

At Orinda City Hall, the green features are gentle nudges. Fans

hang from high ceilings. Conference tables are made of sunflower seed hulls. There are waterless urinals in the men's bathroom. In offices, sensors shut off overhead lights when there's enough help from the sun.

Taken together, touches such as these reduce the building's energy demand to the point that conventional air conditioning isn't needed. Instead, the air is cooled by a system that relies on evaporated water (when open windows don't do the trick).

Nothing feels radical, though. The ambiance inside the quiet, high-ceilinged offices is old-fashioned — like a well-kept landmark where the air and light have a relaxed tone.

"There's no aesthetic choice in

this building made as a result of sustainability," said Burton Edwards, one of the architects involved in the design.

As for the probable Gold rating from the Green Building Council — a nonprofit organization that has managed to make itself into a national arbiter of sustainable design — Orinda set out with hopes of Silver. When Siegel & Strain tested the project against the council's checklist, they realized an even higher ranking was possible.

The emphasis on LEED feels awkward to Siegel & Strain. The Emeryville firm has been active in the field for more than a decade, going back to when "green building" connoted a sense of back-to-the-land self-righteousness. But it

still doesn't hire LEED consultants, and it didn't add gimmicks to the design to win an extra ratings point or two.

"We did include a place to lock up bicycles and a shower (to encourage alternative commuting patterns to automobiles). That's an easy point," Edwards conceded. "But the city wanted one anyway. Workers jog at lunch."

Online resources

To learn more about LEED ratings:

◆ www.usgbc.org

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