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A Building So Green, It's Platinum

By CHRISTOPHER HAWTHORNE

SANTA MONICA, Calif. TODAY, when Robert Redford opens the Southern California office of the Natural Resources Defense Council here, a building that bears his name, he is likely to stop short of declaring it the greenest commercial design in America. Experts in sustainable architecture say that trying to assess the energy efficiency of a new building is usually folly, since what is important is performance over time.

Still, it seems pretty clear that the council, an environmental advocacy organization with 600,000 members, and the building's architects, Moule & Polyzoides of Pasadena, are gunning for that title. The 15,000-square-foot building, on a densely packed street just two blocks from the ocean, has been conceived as a showcase for the latest in sustainable design.

As the name of the \$5.1 million building indicates, the council and Hollywood have joined forces. Mr. Redford has been on the group's board since 1975, while other celebrities are more recent converts.

On the ground floor, visitors can sit at computers in the Leonardo DiCaprio e-Activism Zone, a space that sits within the David Family Environmental Action Center, named for Larry David, a creator of "Seinfeld," and his wife, Laurie, a Natural Resources Defense Council board member.

In Hollywood, "being green is kind of hip now," said Angie Brooks, a principal at Pugh & Scarpa, a Santa Monica firm known for its sustainable architecture. "You see celebrities in their electric cars."

Next month, the environmental group's office is expected to be one of the first buildings to receive the United States Green Building Council's updated Platinum rating. Other buildings have received the designation, but the building council beefed up its standards three years ago.

"The N.R.D.C. was as curious as we were about finding out exactly what was actually achievable in terms of sustainability in architecture, as opposed to the world of the ideal," said Elizabeth Moule, the lead architect on the project. The organization's leaders were also, she admitted, "relentless" about winning the platinum designation.

The Robert Redford Building had some advantages in its application for platinum status. Both Ms. Moule and some senior Natural Resources Defense Council staff members have worked closely with the building council on its environmental standards.

The group estimates that the building will use about 60 percent to 75 percent less energy than a typical commercial building of the same size. It is a renovation of an existing office block, but it looks entirely new. The flooring is made of easily replenished woods like bamboo and poplar. The roof is partly covered with photovoltaic solar panels that will provide about 20 percent of the building's electricity. Three light wells bring daylight into first-floor offices, and operable windows capture breezes off the ocean.

"That doesn't mean that we never have to turn the lights on during the day, or that we'll never close the windows," said Joel Reynolds, a senior attorney for the environmental group. "But we have control over those things."

Toilets in the building use water recovered from showers, sinks and rainfall. And there's a choice of two flushes, a half flush of about 0.6 gallons or a full one of 1.2 gallons. (The standard in the United States is about 1.6 gallons.)

"The whole gray-water system really breaks ground as far as Southern California is concerned," said Dimitris Klapsis, an architect at Moule & Polyzoides. "Every single drop of water that falls on this building is captured and harvested."

But if the Redford Building aims to be state-of-the-art in terms of sustainability, its architecture is decidedly old-fashioned. Its two-story front facade has classical proportions and clapboard siding and is topped by a decorative cornice. The light wells suggest the interior of a lighthouse.

"The design is meant to be very approachable and low-tech in terms of its architectural expression," Ms. Moule said. "We wanted it to be a kind of vernacular building that could contribute to the distinct regional qualities of this area." The vernacular she is referring to is more generic seaside, however, than expressly Southern Californian.

She added: "Frankly, I'm a critic of people who make green buildings in really exotic ways, because it's important that these techniques seem viable and practical for people."

Along with her partner, Stefanos Polyzoides, Ms. Moule helped found the Congress for the New Urbanism, which preaches the benefits of neighborhoods scaled for pedestrians rather than cars. The Redford Building may be the first project to firmly link sustainability and New Urbanism, although somewhat discordantly: the main view to the east of the building is of a hulking multilevel garage. A terrace at the rear, overlooking the beach, is surrounded by rooftop conference rooms that resemble buildings at Seaside, Fla., perhaps the most famous New Urbanist development.

Whatever one makes of its design, the building will only bolster Santa Monica's reputation as a center for sustainable architecture.

Mr. Redford, for his part, said he had no complaints about how the building turned out. "I would have imagined if ever a building would be named after me, it would be either empty or condemned," he said.