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Living and Sustainability: An Environmental Critique of Design and Building Practices, Locally and Globally

1. Paper / Proposal Title:

Reversing Codified Unsustainable Building Practices: Reflections by a Middle American Practitioners

2. Format:

Verbal presentation with slide show; written paper for publication.

3. Author(s) Name:

John T. Beedon

4. University or Company Affiliation:

Beehold LLC

Oklahoma City, OK

5. Abstract (300 words):

This paper describes the experiences of a professional general contractor/builder in the urban area of Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, United States, in relation to sustainable residential building. The general contractor's perspective on sustainable building is salient due to the position of the contractor at the intersection of policy; capabilities of the architectural/structural engineering private sector; available resources and subcontractors; customer demands; and profitability.

The context of this study, in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, is uniquely informative as Oklahoma City in many ways represents regressive trends in building in the United States. This paper pays particular attention to the codification of unsustainable building practices at the municipal level of city ordinances, such as in Oklahoma City's use of a ten-year old Universal Building Code that does not reflect recent sustainable perspectives, or in the privileging of a nostalgic aesthetic over sustainable practices in Historic Preservation-district administration.

It also addresses Oklahoma City's unique position within a range of extreme weather systems—the city is prone to flooding, tornadoes, ice storms, extreme heat and draught—and whether/how these risk situations are addressed within Oklahoma City's local media, public, and practitioner building discourses. In this context, it highlights the unfortunate prevalence of asphalt composition shingles in the local building industry, and a lack of design related to property water management in the way of rain gardens or flood prevention. Broadly, the paper addresses the role of local media—including newspapers, cultural and activist publications, and social media—and how they represent, or don't, issues of sustainability.

Besides also considering the builder's experiences related to regressive building policies, this paper focuses on the roles of administration, local media coverage, and grassroots activism in pushing new sustainable trends in residential building in Oklahoma City.

6. Author(s) Biography (200 words each):

At the age of 10, John Beedon spent the summer with his Grandpa Bud—who had designed and built his own "modern" house in the early 1960s—on the shore of Lake Michigan. John and his grandfather spent the summer drawing floor plans. Fourteen years later, John inherited his grandfather's tools. During high school in Norman, Oklahoma, John worked for a residential building contractor who was utilizing cutting-edge building materials at the time. At the age of 24, John got a really good deal on a termite-ridden home in a historic area of Norman, for which John built new beams; spent weeks in the crawl space with 20 ton jacks, shoring and leveling; and restored the 25 double-hung wood sash windows himself.

John then spent 12 years working in construction in New Hampshire, Florida, and California. He returned to Oklahoma 12 years ago and has worked on projects as diverse as helping put a working cattle ranch in South Park, Colorado on the National Registry of Historic Places; helping implement the renovation of the SixTwelve community space in the Paseo District in Oklahoma City; and running a management and maintenance company for residential properties. John now spends much of his time on design and build projects for clients and on speculation, with a view toward energy and resource efficiency.