

This article is reprinted from the February 23, 2008 edition of The Signal, a local newspaper in Santa Clarita

Real Life Church Thinks Green

Landscaped roof, less water usage and longer lasting materials highlight design

2/23/2008

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When the leaders of Real Life Church began brainstorming ideas for the design of their future home at the Bridgeport Marketplace in Valencia, they figured it would look like the standard worship center.

But then they came across their last design option from Vision Builders Group, a Sylmar-based construction company that specializes in churches. Although Vision Builders Group had the most expensive plan, initially totaling about \$8 million, its underground design and landscaped roof inspired the Valencia church. Now three years later, Real Life Church is continuing its ambitious project of creating a "green" church that not only gives back to the environment but also to the local community.

The Design

With its innovative design, Real Life church strives to make a difference in the local area. "We wanted to do something for the community," Jeremy Vanderlinden, executive pastor of Real Life Church said.

More importantly, Real Life's plan will create an appealing view for the homeowners above the McBean Parkway shopping center as the sight of air conditioning units on the top of the building will be replaced with the landscaped roof. "We were being good neighbors and good examples," Vanderlinden said. Vanderlinden said the roof's design has been proven and they will be taking measures to waterproof the location and include drainage for rainy conditions. Additionally, to prevent people from walking on top of the roof, Vanderlinden said they will most likely install a fence where the roof slopes down to meet the ground. The planned design, however, goes beyond a roof dotted with trees and grass, because the entire building will integrate itself into the environment. The current designs show that the only open wall will be in the front of the church. All of the remaining walls of the 37,000-square-foot center will be built underground as a way to control the building's heating and cooling costs, the pastor said. Dario Pascarelli, partner of Vision Builders Group and project manager, said the design is "cutting edge" and not often seen with churches. As for being kind to the environment, Pascarelli said the church will create a product that doesn't have a negative impact on the community. "It's very unique," he said.

Green-Certified

As the church develops its plans by including waterless urinals and materials that last longer, Vanderlinden said they hope to reach the gold standard for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, a certification given by the U.S. Green Building Council denoting environmentally-friendly designs. This certification will make Real Life one of the first churches in the United States and the only church in California to have this certification, Vanderlinden said. Pascarelli said the design certification brings many requirements, ranging from how materials are recycled during construction to how the building will be lit and shaded in design.

Bumps in the Road

But implementing the design will be difficult. After three years of planning, Vanderlinden said the building is expected to cost more than \$2 million more than originally anticipated. Additionally, Vanderlinden said they first hoped that the building would be completed by Easter 2009. "That would kind of be our dream," he said. However, he is unsure if that will be possible and hopes construction will be completed by June or July of 2009.

A Big Change

Regardless, building a new church will be a major change for the 1,200-member congregation. Currently Vanderlinden said Real Life holds its 9 a.m. and 10:30 a.m. Sunday services at the gym of West Ranch High School in Stevenson Ranch. The 7-year-old church also rents out classrooms when more room is needed. Although increasing membership is a goal with the new church, Vanderlinden said, "We just want a permanent facility that we can call home." With a bigger center, Vanderlinden said Real Life will help others local churches that need a place to worship. For the community, he hopes to initiate festivals at the center open to all of the Santa Clarita Valley. But at the same time, Vanderlinden sees Real Life's eye-catching design as a way to draw people into church. "We think it's a way for people who have never been to church to come to church and see one of those churches that cares about the environment," he said.