

PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW

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'Green' pioneer from Ross still blazing trail

By [Richard Byrne Reilly](#)

TRIBUNE-REVIEW

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At the end of a gravel driveway off Union Avenue in Ross, inside his office in a converted three-story farmhouse, the man many in Western Pennsylvania consider a trailblazer in green design sat talking enthusiastically about his latest creation.

Developer Ernie Sota says the custom townhouses he is building on the South Side Slopes under construction will contain energy recovery ventilator air systems that will reduce annual heating costs from \$1,800 to \$700.

Native species landscaping comes standard. Customers willing to shell out \$575,000 to \$590,000 for a unit will get double-paned windows that retain heat in the winter and insulate in the summer. Water-saving smart toilets have two buttons, for solids and liquids.

"Energy efficiency is not a hard sell," said Sota, who as a teenager pumped gas and repaired cars at his father's service station in Homestead. "Does anybody really think energy prices are going down?"

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Sota has earned a reputation as one of the earliest regional advocates of green design, local builders and officials say.

Sota sits on the board of the Green Building Alliance and is one of the organizers for the Green green building conference in Pittsburgh on March 15 at the Westin Convention Center Hotel,

Downtown. The conference promotes green energy construction and the cost benefits of recyclable materials. During the conference, he will give tours of local green developments to developers and builders.

Sota, the chairman of the alliance's public policy committee, is helping to write legislation to present to Pittsburgh City Council that would streamline the process for building green. On the state level, he is pushing measures to provide tax breaks for certified green construction. He is scheduled as a featured speaker at a conference in Toronto next month on green commercial development.

Schools, loft developments, houses, radio stations and retirement communities bearing Sota's green stamp are springing up in Squirrel Hill, Moon, Shadyside, the North Side and the South Side. He has been personally involved in 700 restoration or development projects.

Photo Gallery

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Ernie Sota
Heidi Murrin/Tribune-Review

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"There was a time when what he was seen doing was kind of off the edge. Now people are really looking at his work and thinking 'Hey, this is cool stuff. This is cutting edge.' Now they're trying to catch up with the kind of work Ernie's been doing for a long time," said Rebecca Flora, executive director of the Green Building Alliance, who teaches at Carnegie Mellon University's Heinz School of Public Policy and Management.

"The skeptics of green design are asking questions while Ernie's down the road looking at the next innovation," she said. "Absolutely he's a trailblazer."

Since 2003, Sota has garnered five national awards from the likes of the Boston Society of Architects, National Association of Home Builders and the U.S. Green Building Council.

Sota's interest in the green movement began at Penn State University, where he earned a degree in environmental design. He worked for the Urban Redevelopment Authority restoring old mansions on the North Side in the 1970's, and became fascinated by using cost-effective technology to weatherproof and insulate drafty buildings.

In 1977, he built his first green structure, a futuristic bio-shelter greenhouse on the roof of a building he owns on 17th Street. The bio-shelter absorbs heat in the winter that is used to heat the building.

Sota undertook a massive renovation of the 165,000-square-foot Felician Sisters Convent and School complex, a \$19 million overhaul completed in 2004. The aging buildings in Moon then were models of energy inefficiency.

Sota's crews installed a modern filtration system that pumped fresh air into the nuns' living quarters. An unused cistern in a basement stores rainwater that keeps the building cool in the summer. Other features were eat-trapping solar panels, nonleaded building materials and the conversion of a 7-acre parcel of lawn into a native species meadow with flowers and plants.

"We have a new lease on life with modern amenities, and the original character of the buildings has been retained," said Provincial Minister Sister Mary Christopher Moore. "There's been a remarkable difference in the health of the older sisters. They're getting better air. They're alert and wide awake. It's beautiful."

Pittsburgh ranks third in the nation behind Portland, Ore., and Chicago for the number of Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design buildings, according to the U.S. Green Building Council, a private association. LEED certification means buildings are environmentally friendly, healthy and profitable for the people working and living in them, according to the council's mission statement.

"Ernie's always been thinking about green design, before it was cool," said John Martine, a principal architect at the firm Strada LLC, Downtown, who has known Sota for 30 years.

"He's a unique searcher of solutions. He's always got something cooking. He doesn't get stuck in any well-worn groove," Martine said. "Ernie's always thinking of ways to bring light into a building. He's always leaping ahead."

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