

ON THE SHOULDERS OF GIANTS

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I was a bit surprised, the first time I rode the ski lifts at Sundance, to see the sign “powered by wind” on the sides of the lift suspension towers. But wind-powered lifts are just the tip of the snowdrift, as it were, of the environmentally sensitive approach of Robert Redford’s Utah resort. On-site glass-blowers recycle wine and beer bottles from the resort’s restaurants into dishware for the eateries and for sale in gift shops. Guest lodgings are small, rustic, nestled into the trees, and come equipped with recycling bins. Soap makers craft bars of soap for the lodge in their Sundance workshop, using herbs grown at the nearby Sundance Farms. The resort’s layout leaves trees, canyon walls, waterfalls and streams virtually untouched. Sundance, where I visited again in early September, is a model of environmentally sustainable development. Guests are invited to enjoy the beauty of a natural site, while disturbing it minimally.

The “mainstreaming of green” is everywhere today – on the cover of *Time* and *Newsweek*. Driven by concern about global climate change and the price of gas, sustainable practices from energy use to agriculture are entering the popular psyche. Hybrid cars are in such demand that, rather than wait on a list for months, we purchased our Toyota Prius on eBay from a dealer in Connecticut, where hybrids are apparently not quite as popular, and had it shipped to the Bay Area. Safeway has begun to carry organic produce, as has giant retailer Walmart. Cypress Semiconductor has bought a majority stake in SunPower, a solar panel manufacturing company, and Nanosolar is in the process of standing up a 100,000 square foot manufacturing plant in the Bay Area to produce film with photovoltaic collectors printed on it – a new process that could bring the cost of solar collectors down dramatically and multiply the locations in which they can be used. Bay Area venture capitalists like Draper Fisher Jurvetson and Vinod Khosla are staking investments in the renewable energy field.

Significant, if controversial, public policy measures are also coming before us, which could provide more options for clean energy. An example is California ballot Proposition 87 this November, which would tax California petroleum producers to establish a \$4 billion fund for alternative energy development.

With this new focus on green, we must not forget that many thought leaders and public figures have been warning,

exhorting and urging us to adopt green practices for more than a generation. Robert Redford is just one of those, and he is to be admired for putting his beliefs into practice at Sundance, creating a practical model for others. The late Senator Gaylord Nelson and then-Stanford student body president Denis Hayes raised public consciousness about the environment when they established Earth Day in 1970, and it has been observed every year since that time. Hayes, now heading a foundation in Seattle, has continued to provide leadership on clean energy and the environment over the ensuing decades. Former President Jimmy Carter set up the Solar Energy Research Institute, under the U.S. Department of Energy, in 1977 – and it was headed by Hayes prior to its funding dwindling in later years.

Architect William McDonough, based in Charlottesville, Virginia, has been designing green buildings for decades, and has spawned a cadre of green architects, designers and builders. Their buildings are to be found on college campuses including Oberlin in Ohio and De Anza College in Cupertino (the latter funded by Silicon Valley philanthropists Steve and Michele Kirsch), at the Villa Montalvo arts center in Saratoga, in the new wing of Moscone Center and the new General Services Administration building in San Francisco.

Not all green leaders are nationally famous. My friend Alrie Middlebrook, a landscape designer based in Los Gatos, designs gardens exclusively with native plants, and wages a campaign she calls “lose the lawn,” through which she exhorts Bay Area companies and homeowners to replace their water- and pesticide-consuming green expanses with drought tolerant native plants. She and Strybing Arboretum botanist Glenn Keator have a book, *Natives in Style*, featuring showcase gardens designed with native plants, coming out from UC Press next spring.

Had we followed the advice of these thoughtful individuals decades ago, the curve we face in bringing green into the mainstream today would not be as steep. In February, 2007, at its annual awards dinner, The Commonwealth Club will pay tribute to those individuals who showed the way toward sustainability, especially in energy resources, as well as those leading the green movement today. Let us make sure that this time we stay the course, so that green becomes a major and permanent aspect of the American economy and way of life. Ω



Photo by Gloria Duffy