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LIKE FLYING TO THE MOON

by Ben Yorker

In 1961, John F. Kennedy laid out an almost insane challenge to the technological community: In a fit of Cold War panic, he set a goal of landing a man on the moon.

Of course, his challenge — and the implied threat of Soviet aerospace dominance — inspired an accomplishment nothing short of miraculous. It was within that very decade that Neil Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin and Michael Collins completed their mission to the moon. Moreover, it demonstrated what can be accomplished when citizens are galvanized by a shared concern and common vision.

As odd as it might seem, there's a strong similarity between the early Space Race days and our current predicament with respect to the endangered health of our planet. As the threat of Soviet aerospace dominance has been replaced with record-breaking droughts, tsunamis, melting ice-caps and heat waves that appear with statistically significant regularity, we now are confronted by the consequences of a battered atmosphere, a compromised ecosystem, and a host of depleted resources.

But while the Space Race only involved the scientific community, every one of us has a stake in today's crisis. Nonetheless, it's probable that the U.S. ultimately will make the most meaningful contributions to the fight for our world's health.

So how does this tie in with real estate development? In the case for saving the planet, minimizing impact and maximizing sustainability when it comes to green building mirror the paradigm-shifting leaps that often are apparent in difficult times. Over the past few years, the building industry has been introduced to an entirely new sector that seemingly grew up overnight.

In a wonderful twist, hard-working, intelligent professionals are making money at solving these problems. From sustainability consultants, who are trained to guide design teams through complex and exhaustive certification programs, to commissioning agents, engineers who test a variety of building systems to ensure they're performing as cleanly and efficiently as possible, there now is almost an entire new economy centered around the green building industry.

There also are many benchmarking organizations, including the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC) and National Association of Home Builders (NAHB), which hire their own consultants in the form of think tanks, testing agencies, and steering committees.

And what about the armies of sales representatives who educate the industry on the continuous flow of green products developed daily? Without these manufacturer representatives, our design and building projects would incorporate only the most basic technologies.

Ten years ago, the green building industry was, at best, nascent. As with the Space Race, we find ourselves extraordinarily far along after just a decade. Our economy also has benefited from hundreds of new jobs, companies, products, and services that spawn and multiply during any kind of technological revolution.

Of course, it is not time to congratulate ourselves just yet. But it's likely that one of the most difficult steps is almost behind us. The economy is showing signs that it can take on this new mission. If the building industry is any indication, then our civilization will make the leaps necessary to rebalance the environment.

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