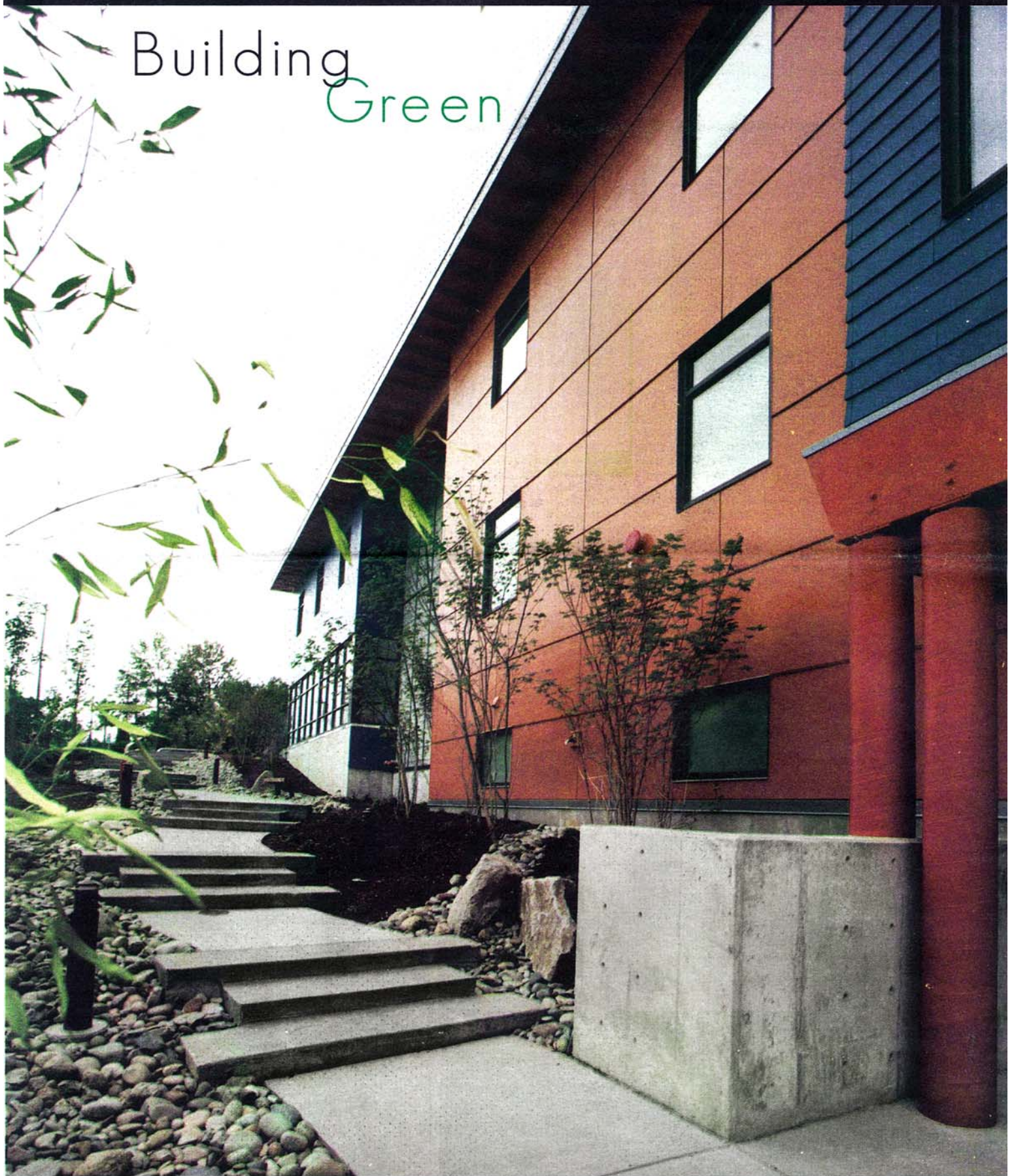


Building Green



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African Americans and sustainability: It's all about 'making do'

■ *Black-owned DKA Architecture serves nonprofits, public agencies with its culture of resourcefulness.*

DKA Architecture wasn't going for gold when the firm took on the renovation of the Police Support Center for the city of Seattle. The Seattle architecture firm was just

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doing what was normal — designing the very best building the firm could, given the client's limited budget and resources.

The repurposed warehouse and coffee roaster became the first LEED gold

renovation in the state, the second gold in Seattle and the first large project to achieve a LEED gold for the city of Seattle.

But for founder Donald King and the DKA Architecture team, it was simply making do with what you have. It's a central tenet of King's African-American culture, one that dovetails with the needs of their clients, which are nonprofits, governments and public agencies with limited resources.

Waste not

Making do with less, maximizing limited resources and designing within budget is ingrained in DKA Architecture's staff. It's something they've been quietly doing for years, but their way of doing business is now becoming trendy, thanks to a heightened awareness of building green and sustainably.

"Living sustainably means living within your means," says Rico Quirindongo, a principal at DKA.

Making do with what you have — something most African Americans do on a daily basis — is an integral part of the culture. Living sustainably also means being economical — from conserving resources, materials and energy to making sure nothing is wasted to maximizing what little resources we have to create the best possible outcome, says Quirindongo.

For King and Quirindongo, it was the nature of their upbringing.

"My mother would open up the refrigerator on a regular basis, look inside, see there wasn't a lot there, and would cobble together five different things," says Quirindongo, 39. "Someone else might say 'Oh well, there's not enough there.' But she man-



The Asian Counseling and Referral Service building in Seattle was designed to be energy efficient and to minimize future maintenance costs.
Photo courtesy of DKA Architecture

aged to make a delicious meal every night."

"That is very real as it relates to our experience working with nonprofits and public agencies," he adds. "We're really talking about the same thing."

Humble beginnings

As it is with most small businesses, DKA Architecture is an outgrowth of Donald King's career as an architect. Since the firm's humble beginnings in King's back bedroom in 1985, clients have consisted of public agencies, nonprofits and governments because those were the only entities that would take a chance on an African American, and the only groups "working on minority projects."

King followed in the pioneering footsteps of Mel Streeter, who founded Seattle's third African-American-owned architecture firm in 1967. "Mel Streeter was my mentor, friend, competitor and collaborator," says King, who is 60. "He often told me of his struggles and how things would be better for me. He often was a beacon in the storm. We compared notes of our careers and limited opportunities. These limitations brought us strength in learning to be resourceful in the fullest sense of the word."

Like Streeter, King was often frustrated that his firm was not able to cultivate the relationships necessary to pursue private corporate projects — office towers, high-tech facilities or high-profile projects. Such projects often bring star-power, additional work, accolades and attention, which most architects covet.

Working on community projects meant DKA constantly had to maximize its designs and balance existing resources because their clients' budgets and stakeholders required it.

"These clients, by the nature of their minority positions, are rooted in cultures that have been required to conserve, tread lightly, and otherwise develop and operate within their means in order to survive and flourish," says Quirindongo.

Reclamation, repair and restoration for reuse — now becoming a growing industry sector — became a core specialty as a result of the work the firm was able to win, says King.

And because the firm believes in social sustainability, DKA has long brought green and sustainable features to projects, nonprofits and agencies that initially dismiss the features as too costly. For years, these groups couldn't justify the cost of adding energy-saving features and using environmentally friendly materials when they lack the money to adequately serve their clients.

But DKA, using a decision-making matrix they've honed over the years showing the cost savings and environmental and health benefits, has figured out a way to accomplish as much as their clients' budgets allow.

"We believe that the architectural work we do should serve a higher good and at the same time be as gentle, kind and friendly to the environment that we live in as it possibly can," says Quirindongo. "Because the communities we work with tend to already have an ethic of making do with what they have

instead of being a culture of waste, we have always involved ourselves in a design model that is akin to sustainability."

Two case studies

At the Asian Counseling and Referral Service for instance, the DKA team designed a new building carefully so that the Seattle nonprofit could have a highly functional building, one that was energy efficient and helped minimize future maintenance costs, says King.

It was also important to create a healthy, inviting interior for its employees and clients, who often work in challenging situations. This was achieved by flooding the building with natural light, which lightens the mood and helps relieve stress.

At Seattle's Police Support Facility, DKA, Turner Construction and the city worked together to turn an old Starbucks roasting plant and headquarters, and a meatpacking plant into a state-of-the-art security and communications campus.

The \$25 million renovation from 2000 to 2004 presented two challenges. Months after they began to design the project, the buildings were damaged by the 2001 Nisqually earthquake, which sent them back

to the drawing board with additional needs to address. The team also had to figure out a way to deal with the 300-million-plus gallons of water that flowed hourly onto the site, which is located in a tidal mudflat zone, and needed to be pumped into the storm-sewer system to avoid flooding the first floor of one of the buildings.

By tapping into the earthquake insurance funds, DKA added seismic strengthening, insulation and a new roof to the project. To address the water issue, a water reclamation system was designed that flushes toilets, washes vehicles and waters plants, and conserves an estimated 1 million gallons a year.

"At that time, no one really thought of a renovation having LEED potential," says King. "That was one of the reasons there are so few of them, and one of the reasons we were able to take this lemon and turn it into 'golden' lemonade."

DKA also reused and restored furniture, cabinets and doors left behind by Starbucks, something most architects don't think of doing.

"It's something we've learned from our less-privileged clients that couldn't afford to buy new furniture or build new buildings," King says. "We made do with what we had to make it look better and keep within budget."

The U.S. Green Building Council is now looking at the reuse of fixtures, furnishings and those kinds measures as part of their certified materials and points list, King says.

"With large budgets, it's pretty easy to be able to add the green bells and whistles," he says. "But when you're looking at a limited budget, it generally means you have to be more resourceful, and that means you don't waste much. And if you don't waste much, then the project is more green."

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