

MORMON CHURCH'S 36,000-HOME DREAM

Hi, I'm Ronan, and you're watching This Week's Sustainable Building News.

We start with breaking housing data, and it isn't encouraging for homebuilders. New numbers released Tuesday show U.S. construction spending fell again in July, reaching its lowest level in nearly three years. Residential construction dropped 1.3 percent, but the bigger number is single-family construction spending, down 3.2 percent in just one month and 6.5 percent from a year ago. High mortgage rates and a growing inventory of unsold new homes are putting builders in a difficult position: They need to keep producing housing, but buyers increasingly can't afford what's being built. Multifamily was one of the few bright spots, edging up slightly for the month.

https://www.reuters.com/business/us-construction-spending-drops-nearly-three-year-low-july-2026-09-01/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

Here's a real estate story you probably didn't see coming. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has become one of America's largest landowners, and it's increasingly getting into housing. Bloomberg estimates the church owns at least 2.4 million acres worth more than \$20 billion. Outside Denver, its real estate arm is planning a 960-acre community for more than 12,000 people. In Florida, its massive Sunbridge development spans about 27,000 acres and could eventually include more than 36,000 homes. Major projects are also planned in Arizona and Texas. And here's what really sets the church apart: It reportedly thinks in 50-to-100-year time horizons, buys with cash and holds land for generations. Projects this large raise questions about water, infrastructure, conservation and sprawl. And given restrictions the church has placed on some other properties—such as not allowing coffee and alcohol to be served—there are also questions about how much influence it will exert over these new communities. Homebuilders usually watch the Lennars and D.R. Hortons of the world. There may be another major housing player worth watching.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2026-08-25/florida-colorado-developments-a-re-part-of-mormon-church-s-real-estate-arm?>

For decades, the International Building Code has allowed something surprising: bedrooms with no windows. That's about to change. Architect and University of Texas professor Juan Miró spent five years fighting to close the loophole after windowless bedrooms began appearing in Austin student housing. Austin banned the practice in

2024. Now Miró has won a change to the model code used across much of the country. Beginning with the 2027 International Building Code, residential bedrooms and living rooms will be required to have natural light. Multifamily and building groups argued the requirement could complicate difficult sites and adaptive reuse projects. But supporters prevailed by a vote of 211 to 83. For now, one unusual building-code loophole is closing: Bedrooms will need daylight again.

<https://www.archpaper.com/2026/08/juan-miro-windowless-bedrooms-ban/>

Solar power may be about to get a lot more plug-and-play. California lawmakers have passed a bill allowing small portable solar systems that can sit on a balcony or in a backyard and plug directly into a standard 120-volt outlet. Think solar without the rooftop installation. The technology is particularly interesting for renters and people with smaller homes who have largely been shut out of traditional rooftop solar. Advocates say these systems could save households \$400 to \$800 a year. And this isn't some fringe experiment. Germany already has more than one million plug-in solar systems, and 10 U.S. states have approved similar legislation. There is pushback. Electrical workers have raised concerns about fire and electrical risks if consumers install the systems improperly, and California's bill establishes safety standards for the technology. The legislation now heads to Governor Gavin Newsom. If he signs it, California could become a very big test of a simple idea: What happens when generating some of your own electricity becomes almost as easy as plugging in an appliance?

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/state/california/2026/08/28/california-lawmakers-pass-plug-in-solar-bill-aimed-at-reducing-energy-costs/91494266007/>

Baltimore is testing a different approach to affordable housing: turn vacant lots into high-performance modular homes while creating jobs and wealth in the surrounding community. The Bmore Build Forward initiative uses factory-built components and highly efficient envelopes, with rooftop solar designed to produce more than twice the energy the homes consume. The surplus power is intended to generate revenue for home maintenance and resident wealth building. But the model goes beyond the homes. Local residents are being trained for construction careers, while small developers pool resources through a cooperative to lower costs and risk. The goal is ambitious: turn Baltimore's vacant properties into a scalable model for affordable housing and neighborhood revitalization without displacement.

[art: Baltimore 1 and 2]

And Baltimore's experiment may be getting some help from the building codes themselves. Off-site construction could get a significant boost from the nation's next generation of building codes. The 2027 International Building and Residential Codes will incorporate new standards designed to make modular and off-site projects easier to approve across jurisdictions. That matters because one of the obstacles to factory-built housing isn't the technology. It's actually navigating different approval processes from one place to another. The new provisions create a more consistent framework for inspections and approvals, potentially helping projects move faster, reduce waste and lower construction costs. Seven states have already adopted the standards, including recent additions Maine and New Hampshire. As policymakers look for ways to increase housing production and affordability, removing regulatory friction around off-site construction could be one relatively simple place to start.

<https://link.mediaoutreach.meltwater.com/is/click?>

Nearly half of Americans have considered a skilled trade career, but only about 15 percent take action, often because of training costs. Quality Training Centers, an HVAC and electrical school, is flipping that calculation with a new Cost Calculator that estimates how much potential income someone loses by delaying training. Instead of asking what training costs, the tool asks: What could waiting cost you? With construction facing a persistent skilled labor shortage, that could be a powerful way to get more workers into the trades.

<https://www.qualitytrainingcenters.com/cost-calculator/>

Could the skyscrapers of the future be made from wood? The Guardian takes us inside Norway's MEE OS TAR NA, an 18-story, 277-foot tower built primarily from timber. Its massive glulam beams were precision-fabricated nearby and assembled almost like a giant flat-pack skyscraper, at nearly one floor per week. The bigger opportunity is carbon. Replacing some emissions-intensive concrete and steel with responsibly sourced mass timber could significantly reduce a building's embodied carbon. There are tradeoffs, including cost, forestry impacts and the need for some concrete. But timber towers are multiplying around the world. The skyscraper of the future might just start in the forest.

<https://www.theguardian.com/news/ng-interactive/2026/aug/27/the-flat-pack-skyscraper-how-wood-can-shape-the-cities-of-the-future>

Backyard homes are having a moment. A 2024 Massachusetts law made ADUs legal in nearly every community in the state, and more than 1,200 were permitted last year. Now Massachusetts is adding financing, incentives and tools to help homeowners actually build them. It's part of a much larger national shift toward ADUs as states including California and Colorado remove barriers to construction. And the appeal goes beyond housing supply: ADUs are smaller, often all-electric and increasingly factory built, potentially reducing energy use, material waste and operating costs.

<https://www.canarymedia.com/articles/energy-efficiency/massachusetts-embraces-back-yard-homes?>

What home upgrade could save Americans more than \$20 billion a year? Heat pumps. More than 25 million U.S. homes still use electric resistance heating. RMI estimates that a single-family household switching both space and water heating to heat pumps could save about \$1,530 a year, or nearly \$23,000 over 15 years. And COGNITION Smart Data shows consumer interest is surging. So Green Builder Media has three pieces of advice for builders: One: Make the heat pump a headline feature. Don't bury it in the specs, sell the savings. Two: Put the numbers in the buyer's hands. Show them what they could save monthly and over the life of the equipment. Three: Know the incentives. Rebates and credits can turn buyer hesitation into a yes. Heat pumps are a prime affordability strategy.

<https://www.greenbuildermedia.com/blog/the-upgrade-that-saves-billions-of-dollars>

We keep hearing that America's housing crisis is simple: We don't have enough homes. But the numbers tell a more complicated story. Existing-home sales are near a 30-year low, rental and for-sale vacancies are rising, and only about one in six consumers in a recent COGNITION survey blamed their homebuying struggles on a lack of available homes. The bigger problem? Cost. We absolutely need more housing, but as Green Builder Media CEO Sara Gutterman argues in the latest *Valuation Metric*, the real question is: Are we building the right homes, in the right places, at prices people can actually afford to live in? Here's a clip

<https://youtu.be/GdtnBHobHIs>

Our Editor's Product Pick of the Week goes to Room & Board's Urban Wood Project furniture. The company takes wood that might otherwise be discarded, including trees removed from cities, and turns it into new furniture. Room & Board says the initiative has already diverted the equivalent of 365 trees from the waste stream. One example is its Hensley Media Cabinet, made from reclaimed elm. With searches for sustainable

design reportedly up 120 percent over the past year, this is a smart example of circular design turning waste into something people actually want in their homes.

https://www.roomandboard.com/blog/2024/05/our-approach-to-wood-sourcing/?attr=SustainableWoodSourcing&camp=47494762_18010&et rid=721437628

That's the news for this week. Do me a favor. Like this video, share it with someone who needs to see it, and subscribe so you never miss an episode. See you next week.