

The Solar Decathlon - Giving Solar Power a Makeover

In the Autumn of next year, the third 'Solar Decathlon' will take place in Washington, D.C.

When it is under way, the experts and spectators alike will see some of the best examples in the world of the relationship between design and solar power.

Comprising 20 teams - each representing universities or colleges - entrants are expected to build a house that is solar powered, and is judged on aesthetics and design.

The official Solar Decathlon website has this to say:

"Teams of college students design a solar house, knowing from the outset that it must be powered entirely by the sun. In a quest to stretch every last watt of electricity that's generated by the solar panels on their roofs, the students absorb the lesson that energy is a precious commodity. They strive to innovate, using high-tech materials and design elements in ingenious ways. Along the way, the students learn how to raise funds and communicate about team activities. They collect supplies and talk to contractors. They build their solar houses, learning as they go."

Perhaps the key phrase, then, is that "energy is a precious commodity". What the Solar Decathlon competition tries to show is that sustainable and renewable energy is not just important, but necessary; with climate change on the rise, and fossil fuels declining, the message from the Solar Decathlon is one of duty, not preference.

Which is not to say that sustainable and renewable energy cannot be attractive and exciting, as the competition also shows.

Indeed the ultimate aim of the competition is to fuse the need for sustainable energy with the luxury of good design:

"The Solar Decathletes — tomorrow's engineers, architects, researchers, and homeowners — are sharing with us a new vision for living under the sun. These solar homes are powerful, comfortable, and stylish. They are relaxed and elegant, wasting neither space nor energy.

Today's solar houses connect with nature to take advantage of heat and light from the sun and cooling breezes and shading. But they crank this natural advantage way up by using the newest products and technologies on the market. The Solar Decathlon solar homes combine the best from the past and the present... and deliver the promise of a brighter future."

So the Solar Decathlon is committed to a growing movement that dispels any beliefs on the incompatibility of good looks and sustainable power.

And - since its launch in 2002 - it has proved that point. With the stipulation that the entrants build the houses with only existing commercially available products, the Solar Decathlon commits to sustainable housing that is commercially viable.

Within a commercially anchored framework, then, the teams are judged in 10 contests throughout the competition.

They can be divided into two groups, detailing technology and everyday use.

Technology:

Architecture, Engineering, Communications, Appliances, Lighting, Hot Water, Energy Balance.

Everyday Use:

Market Viability, Comfort Zone, Getting Around.

So the Solar Decathlon brings public interest to the solar development issue; the same institutions that are developing the most high tech and specialist advances in sustainable energy are expected to use their knowledge for the benefit of public and commercial culture.

As the competition begins again next year, the commercial will once again -quite rightfully - take precedence over the specialist.

About the Author

Chris Woolfrey is the [solar power](#) expert at EcoSwitch The environmental social network.

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