
What It Means To Be Green

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By Andrew P. Borgese

We have been hearing more and more about the need or the desire to “be green”. Individuals as well as public, private and municipal organizations are seeking out ways to make their homes, their businesses, and their facilities “greener”. What does that really mean? At a minimum, being green involves designing, constructing and operating buildings in ways that meet specified standards to reduce the negative impact of those buildings on occupants and on the environment.

All of us can (and should) replace our incandescent light bulbs with energy efficient compact fluorescent light bulbs, and this is, indeed, a great place to start, but does that constitute a “green building”? We have seen product manufacturers alter their marketing strategies and adjust their advertising campaigns (and hopefully their products, as well) so they can add the words “green” or “sustainable” to their packaging. The challenge has been in accurately qualifying the validity of these claims and quantifying the effects of these “green additives”, and then integrating those effects with all the other major building systems. What seems lacking, however, are the tools to help us define what is “green” and then to properly plan, integrate and implement appropriate strategies, methodologies and technologies that will enable us to produce green buildings, green neighborhoods, and greener cities.

Well, these tools have not, in fact, been lacking. They have just not been at the forefront of the design, planning and construction industries until recently. One such tool is in the form of a building rating system called LEED – Leadership in Energy

and Environmental Design – which was first released in March of 2002. LEED was developed by the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC) (www.usgbc.org), a non-profit organization “working to transform the way buildings and communities are designed, built and operated, enabling an environmentally and socially responsible, healthy, and prosperous environment that improves the quality of life”. The USGBC realized the need for a system that could define and measure “green buildings” and with input and perspectives from architects, realtors, building owners, lawyers, environmentalists and industry representatives, the LEED Green Building Rating System was launched.

Viewed as a measurement system based on existing proven technology and utilizing accepted energy and environmental principals, LEED addresses the various systems and components that collectively comprise the whole building and evaluates a building’s environmental performance from this holistic perspective. It does this over the building’s life cycle providing what is considered to be a definitive standard for what constitutes a “green building”.

A widespread misconception is that “green buildings” cost substantially more to build than a conventional building. We often think of a building’s cost as the amount of money needed to create the building when in fact, we continue to pay to operate (heat, cool, illuminate, etc.) and maintain that building as long as it is inhabited or otherwise utilized. These life cycle costs contribute dramatically to the overall building cost and annually, can amount to thousands (in larger buildings, hundreds of

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thousands) of dollars more than they would be in a “green building”. This has been a major selling point to commercial and municipal building owners, but also resonates with homeowners who recognize the connections between their own comfort and well-being, a building’s cost efficiency and environmental stewardship. Even more compelling is a recent (2006) report from Davis Langdon, an international construction cost management firm that states there is no significant difference in average costs for green buildings as compared to non-green buildings.

The LEED Green Building Rating System has become the nationally accepted benchmark for the design, construction and operation of high performance green buildings. This is not to say that other tools are without merit. On the contrary, any resources that contribute to, or facilitate the creation of “green buildings” have value and should be explored further. You are likely to find that many of them are based on LEED standards. An established track record has already shown that LEED-Certified buildings have lower operating costs, healthier and more productive occupants, and conserve natural resources. Cities and municipalities nationwide have adopted LEED as the minimum level of design and construction standards. This past year, the City of Boston passed an amendment to the city’s zoning ordinance that requires all new construction exceeding 50,000 square feet to be designed and built to meet or exceed LEED standards. With that move, Boston joined more than 52 other cities that have implemented Green Building Programs nationwide.

Currently, LEED is developing rating systems for several specialized building

types (such as schools, laboratories and healthcare facilities) and the LEED for Homes Rating System is nearing completion of its pilot program and is expected to be released soon. Clearly, we have the tools we need to be “green”. Now it is up to us to take the initiative.

Andrew P. Borgese, AIA, is the Principal of INTEGRÁTA Architecture located at 419 Palmer Ave. in Falmouth. He is a LEED Accredited Professional and a Licensed Construction Supervisor. For more information, or to contact Mr. Borgese please visit www.integrata.us.

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