



Energy Co2 : Energy Efficiency

Are Today's Green Buildings Good Enough?

Brendan Owens of the U.S. Green Building Council discusses why LEED - the world's biggest green building rating system – still matters, and how it aims to improve.



Brendan Owens, Vice President of Technical Development, U.S. Green Building Council

"Benefits of green building go well beyond climate change." (Photo: USGBC)

The U.S. Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Green Building Rating System provides third-party verification that a building is environmentally responsible, profitable, and healthy. It measures aspects of the design, construction, and operation of buildings in five areas: sustainable site development, water savings, energy efficiency, materials selection, and indoor environmental quality.

How has LEED drawn on examples elsewhere in the world? How is it unique?

It's pretty much the universally accepted benchmark in the United States. The market penetration that we see with LEED is unprecedented for any other green building rating system ever. There are just under five billion square feet of project currently in the LEED pipeline. That type of engagement has never existed.

There are other rating systems out there - Australia has GreenStar, Japan has CASBEE, and there's one in France called HQE. Each of the rating system's developers borrowed good ideas from each other (at least I'll admit to it if they won't). That makes the entire universe of rating systems stronger, and I think that that's a very healthy thing.

How much are concerns over climate change driving growth in green building?

It's kind of difficult to say. There are so many other positive aspects that come along with green building. Climate change is a big issue in terms of how we are developing LEED, and how buildings certified under LEED can employ effective climate change mitigation strategies.

Benefits of green building go well beyond climate change. They go to human health, performance, and efficiency. There are marketing benefits for developers who develop green buildings. It's difficult to

say what percentage of green building is being driven by realization of the climate crisis that we have, but I would say that it's in the top-five reasons.



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How could green building be a climate adaptation strategy?

We are asking ourselves the same question. We reward projects that undertake activities that will make the building less vulnerable to disruptions in the ecosystems, whether it's by incorporation of on-site renewable or a holistic view of the site water budget, or making sure the building can operate with natural ventilation strategies.

There is a certain amount of climate change that we are effectively locked into for the next 50 years or so. What can we do with LEED to make "soft failure" something that more people focus on? I think we've got some ideas, and some of those are new credits and some are highlighting the co-benefits of existing credits.

How important is using on-site renewable energy?

We value energy efficiency as the best use of limited capital. It's pretty much universally accepted that efficiency is the first step to reduce your load - then put renewables on your building. There's no value in covering your building in solar panels if you're going to keep the windows open and the air conditioning on.

If a homeowner is interested in building or rebuilding to LEED standards, what are the first steps?

The first step is to figure out what a LEED home means. There are a lot of good education resources on the USGBC website. LEED sets out a lot of priorities, and we want people to look at buildings in an integrated fashion. Having your energy efficient building in a bad location that makes you drive everywhere is not necessarily an optimization strategy that we want people to do. So building optimization requires a little bit of education to get people thinking about what it means to be a green building.

How do you respond to criticism of LEED - that it's more of a checklist than a holistic approach to green building?

I think anybody who thinks that LEED is perfect is flat-out wrong. Paying attention to constructive criticism in and around rating system development is exactly what we want to do. To say that we are letting criticism guide this development is inflated, but to say that we are ignoring it is just as wrong.

The point is that LEED is a market-transformation tool, in addition to being a building environmental assessment methodology. The fact that it plays a dual role opens it to the type of criticism of it being a checklist, or that we aren't being efficient, "eco," or elegant enough.

The rating system is evolving at the pace of the green building industry. We are trying to stay ahead of all of the development happening in and around green buildings.

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Why is it so expensive to be certified by LEED?

It is a double-edged sword. We don't want people to spend money that could otherwise be spent on green building technology. But the act of third-party certification brings with it credibility, repeatability, and delivering something that is much more valuable across the board. And there's a tremendous amount of greenwashing going on right now. People are taking advantage of the fact that green is becoming a much bigger issue. Verification about the claims that are made about a building's carbon footprint, for example, is extremely important. There's a lot at stake.

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