

Environmental Design+ Construction

THE PREMIER SOURCE FOR INTEGRATED HIGH-PERFORMANCE BUILDING

DECEMBER 2005
WWW.EDCMAG.COM
USA \$5.00

The 2006 Green Book

sustainable product +
resource guide

LEED IS NOT PERFECT, BUT IT IS NOT BROKEN

BY ROB WATSON, SENIOR SCIENTIST, NRDC

Six months ago when the "LEED is Broken, Let's Fix It" article came out, I smiled a sad smile and nodded my head in agreement with about 80 percent of what the authors were saying.

At that time, I was still smarting from my experience in certifying Natural Resources Defense Council's (NRDC) Platinum project in Santa Monica, which confirmed all of the most damning critiques in the article. I had seen first-hand that LEED indeed was "costly, slow, brutal, confusing and unwieldy."

As a LEED Accredited Professional, I also was preparing the documentation for a new project in China -- a candidate for "the Inquisition" if there ever was one. The bulk of the background documentation was in Chinese; full translation was not an option, and the only feasible alternative was to summarize the highlights. This was going to be a leap of faith for both LEED and I: on some level we were going to have to trust each other.

So, less than a month after the "broken" critique came out, it was with no small trepidation that I submitted another package to USGBC.

Our preliminary review came back three weeks later, as promised. Before opening it, I had to go out for a walk to calm myself. I honestly was anticipating the same kind of preliminary review we had received for our Santa Monica project when fully half of our credits -- which were overseen and documented by one of USGBC's own LEED review contractors -- came back rejected. When I finally steeled myself to opening the document, I was surprised and delighted to find that no credits were rejected, though several, where the documentation was admittedly thin, required some additional information.

In sum, my experience with the ultimately Gold-certified ACCORD21 project

was 180 degrees different from the Santa Monica project. The review was tough, but fair. It was also fast, flexible and very reasonable. (And, no, "daddy LEED" did not catch any breaks in the process.)

My experience revealed that the "LEED is Broken" article essentially was obsolete the day it was published.

Unfortunately, it's taking a while for the market to catch up to this knowledge. As a result, many deserving projects may have been dissuaded from going through the LEED certification process. This is a shame. It is a loss to the owners, and, ultimately, the transformation of the market to greener building practice.

Informed and constructive criticism is vital to the ongoing improvement of any process. The publication of "LEED is Broken" definitely lit a fire and accelerated many changes that were in the hopper. However, I'm hoping that LEED and its critics can be in closer contact in the future so that retraction of criticism can be issued as quickly and accurately as the original analysis.

Improvements to the documentation review process are just the beginning. At the 2005 Greenbuild Conference in Atlanta, USGBC unveiled significant improvements in streamlining LEED's documentation and certification requirements that maintained credible verification of performance while minimizing unnecessary busy work.

A new on-line workspace will allow better team collaboration and foster better design integration. (On the topic of integration: blaming LEED's checklist format for lack of design integration is like blaming bad art on the fact that there are only three primary colors. While USGBC undoubtedly could do more training in this area, design integration is something that needs to be taught in school, which, by and



large, it is not.

And, integration needs to be demanded by owners who hold teams accountable for both budget and LEED performance. The expected Platinum Oregon Health and Science University building that came in 10 percent under conventional mechanical and electrical engineering construction costs is testimony to the value of integration and how better practices are beginning to permeate the market.)

In addition, LEED Version 2.2 updates energy and other crucial standards while more accurately reflecting the state of the market in materials and other areas. The result is a LEED system that is easier to use, more feasible and cost-effective for developers and owners, while maintaining its rigor.

On the subject of rigor, let's put to rest the canard that LEED buildings are not energy-efficient. They are. We need to abandon the 1980s view that operational energy is the only relevant parameter; it's about 60 percent of the equation. In terms of energy use involving buildings, their location matters (transportation energy), their water efficiency matters (energy to pump, purify and treat afterward), their landscaping matters (heat islands), and the materials used to build them matter (embodied energy). Any LEED-certified building will have achieved a significant combination of these areas that will result in much less energy consumption compared with standard practice.

In addition, let's also not assume that

any current ASHRAE standard represents national standard practice. It does not. The 2004 ASHRAE energy standards or their equivalent are utilized by less than one third of the country; fully half the states use versions comparable to ASHRAE's 1999 standard or even earlier, if they require any energy performance at all.

LEED can and should demand continuous improvement in this area, but a chain breaks at its weakest link. By requiring minimum performance that is too far beyond the ability of the market to deliver, we risk ignoring the sage observation by Gandhi who once said: "A leader who is 100 paces ahead of his followers is revered and called a visionary; one who is a thousand paces ahead is stoned and called a heretic." +



Rob Watson is director of the International Energy and Green Building programs of Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), which he joined in 1985. The "father of LEED," Rob is a former USGBC vice chair and director, and is currently chair of the International Design Center for the Environment (IDCE). He is the only foreigner to have received a Green Building Innovation Award from China's Ministry of Construction, and received the first USGBC Leadership Award in 2002. Rob retired as founding chair of the LEED Steering Committee in November and doesn't know whether to laugh or cry.

"A Tool For All Seasons"



M-1[®] Structural Sealant

- Cold Weather Application
- Fast Setting
- High Adhesion
- Moisture Cure
- Safe—No V.O.C's



CONTRACTOR HOT LINE

800-826-1681

CHEMLINK
Advanced Architectural Products

www.chemlinkinc.com

YOU CAN
CREATE
THIS

WITH THIS

Nature's wall plasters. Choose the environmentally sound way to plaster. Clay naturally controls room climate by regulating arid and humid air, and absorbing and releasing moisture in response to environmental changes. Available in a variety of beautiful finishes and over 12 spectacular colors. Choose American Clay — **Green from start to finish.**

AMERICAN CLAY
THE ORIGINAL EARTH PLASTER™
PATENT PENDING

2004 OUTSTANDING GREEN PRODUCT AWARD — NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF HOME BUILDERS

1.866.404.1634 • AMERICANCLAY.COM

READER SERVICE NO. 98 WWW.EDCMAG.COM/WEBCARD

READER SERVICE NO. 99
WWW.EDCMAG.COM/WEBCARD