

A “GREEN BUILDING” IS NOT NECESSARILY GREEN

By Suzanne S. Hunnicutt, AIA



Most people realize that, when they hear someone refer to a “green building”, they are not talking about the color of the paint. However, they may not know exactly what a green building is. Many believe it simply means that a building is energy efficient. While energy efficiency is an important aspect of being “green”, it is not the only criteria. “Green Building”, “Sustainable Design”, “LEED Certified”, all of these terms are related, but they are not necessarily interchangeable.

So what is a “Green Building”? According to the definition used by the U.S. Green Building Council, a green building is one that significantly reduces or eliminates negative impacts on the environment and on the building occupants. “Sustainable design” is the means of achieving a green building, and refers to the ability of the earth to “sustain” continued development of this type without depletion of essential resources. While the exact characteristics of a green building are often debated, there are six fundamental principles on which nearly everyone agrees.

- Sustainable site development: starts with proper site selection and addresses how the location, orientation, and landscaping of a building affects the local ecosystem, transportation methods and energy use.
- Energy Efficiency: includes not only reducing consumption of energy, but also utilizing renewable energy sources.
- Water conservation: utilizes such things as drought-tolerant landscaping, low-consumption or waterless plumbing fixtures, and water reuse systems.
- Use of Environmentally Preferable Materials: such as products with a high content of recycled material, wood from sustainably managed forests, and locally produced materials reducing resource depletion.
- Enhancement of Indoor Environmental Quality: can be accomplished by maximizing daylighting, providing appropriate ventilation and moisture control and avoiding the use of materials with high VOC emissions.
- Operational and Maintenance Practices: can be optimized by good design and material selections as well as providing documentation and training to the building’s users.

So, how “Green” is “Green”? How do you know if one building is greener than another? The only widely recognized standard for green buildings is the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Green Building Rating System. LEED offers a method for having a building “certified” although critics believe the process is too onerous and the requirements too prescriptive. However, almost any building can be “greener” than the average building with just a little effort and little if any additional cost.

So, why does “Green” matter? How much effect does one building actually have? Probably not much, you could argue, but collectively buildings in the U.S. use 65% of electricity and 36% of the total energy use. They are responsible for 30% of both greenhouse gas emissions and waste output and they consume 30% of all raw materials and 12% of all potable water used nationwide. Clearly, if every new building is even a little greener, it can have a significant impact on the future of our planet.

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