

Sustainable Trend

Environmental awareness and energy efficiency are driving architects and builders to aim for LEED certification. BY Elizabeth Millard

Although the country's airports may be stalled at a threat level of orange, every other industry would appear to prefer the color green. Consumers are advised to eat locally as well as organically, editorials rail against celebrities and others who leave a large "carbon footprint," and people from all walks of life are thinking of ways they can go green.

The commercial real estate trade is certainly not immune to such momentum, but the bid to go green is much more long-term and all-encompassing than here-today trends like swapping plastic bottles for glass.

Developed by the U.S. Green Building Council, the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) building rating system has been driving architects and developers across the nation to employ more environmentally-sustainable practices, and those in the Twin Cities are firmly on the bandwagon.

There are three gold-level LEED-certified buildings in Minnesota, but it shouldn't be long for the number to rise, with two other major developments already shooting for the gold: Baker Road Corporate Center, being built by Welsh Construction, and the 8200 Tower, developed by United Properties.

In January, the University of Minnesota announced that it will seek gold-level LEED certification when it builds its new TCF Bank Stadium. Carleton College is also finalizing building plans for two LEED-certified dormitories.

Building a Future

One of the main reasons developers are going after LEED certifications is simply that clients have started asking about whether buildings

have been constructed using sustainable practices and materials.

Predominantly at large companies, employees and management are savvy about the benefits of energy efficiency and renewable resources, says Bill Kattner, vice president of development at United Properties.

"The more sophisticated a company, the more likely they are of being keenly aware of sustainable design," he says. "Younger employees in particular prefer to be in a building where attention has been paid to air quality, and using recycled building materials, for example. It becomes a recruiting tool, actually, to have offices in a LEED-certified building."

Those who are considering construction often bring up LEED certification, says Bill Krake, president, Welsh Construction. "There's a great deal of attention being paid to issues like green space," he says. "Clients may not understand every component that goes

into a LEED project, but they are paying attention to issues like energy savings and water use."

In addition to increasing environmental awareness among client companies, builders and architects have also found that LEED can work as a competitive differentiator in the marketplace.

"It positions you as someone who's gone that extra step, and who's aware of overall design, environmentally friendly features, energy compatibility, all those aspects that are really appealing to clients," says Mike Schraad, vice president at Welsh.

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Work in Progress

One challenge in pursuing a LEED certification is that materials tend to be more expensive, but many developers note that the

LEED Cheat Sheet

Started in 1998, LEED designation has been granted to over 14,000 projects in the United States and 30 other countries, according to the U.S. Green Building Council. The program was started as a way to establish standards for the previously vaguely-defined “green building” trend, and recognize environmental leadership.

The Council also **hoped to spark competition** among developers and architects, which has largely been true, as builders try to outdo each other with roof gardens that use storm water, venting systems that pipe in fresh air, and building materials made of recycled material.

There are four levels of LEED: Certified, Silver, Gold, and Platinum. Points are awarded after a building’s completion, so that the Council can ensure that there’s ongoing compliance with standards. There are different ratings according to product type. For example, LEED for Existing Buildings gauges operations, improvements, and maintenance, while LEED for Commercial Interiors is designed for building tenants. Other categories include retail, schools, new construction, healthcare, and homes.



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initial upfront costs are offset by promises of energy efficiency in the future. Studies done by the Green Building Council have found that an investment of two percent over standard building costs will yield over 10 times that amount over the lifecycle of a building.

The larger strategic challenge is time: the hallmark of LEED is that it’s an open and transparent process, where materials, designs, and construction practices are reviewed for approval.

“You have to incorporate LEED strategies in all design decisions, and that increases the time it takes on the front end,” says Kattner. “During construction, the time challenges present themselves in the implementation of strategies. For example, you have to make sure that most construction waste is being recycled, and that it’s being documented.”

Later, he adds, a developer has to make sure

that tenants are following standards surrounding areas like electricity consumption when they decide to build out their offices.

Also tricky are the large number of details that are involved with certification. When St. Mary’s/Duluth Clinic aimed for silver designation—and was pleasantly surprised after submitting its paperwork to find it actually qualified for gold-level status—the healthcare building planning team not only looked at materials and practices, but even small factors, such as using paint free of volatile organic compounds. Wood veneers, used in wall panels, were scrutinized using the Forest Stewardship Council certification process, and landscaping was designed in a way that required no irrigation.

For Baker Road Corporate Center, Welsh will be implementing an HVAC system that doesn’t use any CFC refrigerants, since they can

cause ozone depletion. Twenty percent of the construction materials will be regional, to reduce the environmental impact of transportation. And light-colored roofing material will deflect sunlight in summer to keep the building cooler naturally, requiring a larger upfront expenditure but with the promise of reduced air conditioning costs in the future.

Even with the cost and time demands, developers like United Properties and Welsh Construction feel that it’s worth the extra effort. “Ultimately, it comes down to what makes sense and what doesn’t,” says Krake. “Inherently, everyone wants energy efficiency, they want to be environmentally friendly, and LEED is a way to achieve that in a long-term, sustainable way.” **MB**

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