

Who Is Doing the LEEDing?

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I was interested in the Totem Newsletter's synopsis about the chapter's September meeting on green buildings. Since I missed the event, I am not in a position to comment on the discussions that took place. Yet, from other panel discussions I have participated in, I sense the building industry is progressively getting stuck presenting a mantra developed by others rather than digging into the crucial questions of the day.

In my opinion, it is time to stop discussing about what LEED says and start asking more important questions. For example, we should be identifying the philosophies behind the sustainable building movement. We should also be asking if there is any documented rationalization of the LEED point system.

A prime example of a seldom discussed but central issue in the sustainable movement is social equity. The code words are "triple bottom line" and "inclusion of social values in addition to financial considerations". This might sound as good as "environmentally friendly products" but what are the social leaders really trying to get at? A little research would suggest that the philosophy of egalitarianism is being promoted.

You may be thinking that I am making this up. After all, there are no LEED points (yet) for instituting minority quotas in green buildings. This may be so, yet when a prominent green building leader was recently asked what sustainability was about, he said "Equity – social, environmental and financial"!

So what is social and financial equity? I think it's about envy, and indirectly it's about mediocrity. If you work hard and earn more money than the average person, you are penalized through the progressive tax system. Equality of outcome is achieved, rather than equality of opportunity. "The essence of the moral idea of socialism," historian Martin Malia wrote, "is that human equality is the supreme value in life."¹

What has equity got to do with green buildings? I hope nothing, yet many prominent green leaders want to introduce social issues – in the form of *socialism*. Such folks talk about innovation in design, yet they see the primary vehicle for innovation – the free market – as a threat to environmentalism. In a similar vein, government regulation is viewed as the ultimate solution to sustainability (as evidenced by the initiation of certain west coast municipalities mandating LEED certification for city buildings), yet regulation is an innovation impeder.

The equity issue is just one of many sustainable topics the building industry should be having serious dialogue about. Another area where discourse should be taking place is the ever

increasing inclusion of “sustainable” issues. No doubt the 1970’s environmental focus on diminishing resources was myopic. Yet today we are trying to include indoor air quality, ergonomics, transportation issues, building products, energy conservation, recycling opportunities, hazardous materials, and more. At the same time, there is little research, if any, quantifying the relative benefits of suggested measures. Amazingly, economic performance isn’t even on the list.

I’ll admit there is certain attractiveness in being able to fill out a check list. Sure, we need to know what is involved in a program. Most of us use the Standard 62 cfm/ft² table gladly rather than going back to first principles. We just need more open discussion about what principles should be applied to green buildings and make sure the resulting methodologies can be substantiated – not from an emotional, social agenda viewpoint, but from a logical, rationalistic vantage.

Dialoguing about the issues of green buildings should not dampen our resolve to be good stewards of the world. In fact, unearthing some of the non-environmental agendas and unresolved issues will ensure the industry’s approach truly ends up making things better for us all. Right environmentalism should be sincere yet determined to be grounded on reason, focused on the environment, and based on research. ASHRAE has followed a similar approach in developing its standards.

With many of us now understanding the issue of sustainability, it is time to open the circle of dialogue.

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¹ Martin Malia, “A Fatal Logic,” *The National Interest*, Spring 1993, p. 80