

## Can LEED® Be Salvaged?

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Last month, I posted a comment on LinkedIn titled "Is LEED Dying?". I was careful to post this as a group discussion for LEED AP (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design Accredited Professionals) just to see if my peers had similar negative experiences with the submittal process. The responses were sobering. With only one exception, my peers seemed to have the same negative experiences that I have had. One even responded simply "God willing" to my comment "Is LEED Dying?". Only one person offered a strong defense of the LEED system and, not surprisingly, when I reviewed his profile on LinkedIn he is one of the people who helped develop LEED. He stated "Every DAY 14 projects get certified and 16 projects register...sounds pretty alive to me". Does that mean LEED is helping us to reach our green goals? Let's do the math: If 16 projects register each day that adds up to 5,840 projects each year. The current commercial building inventory in the United States is over 4.5-million and growing. Even if we only want to LEED-certify 10% of those buildings, it would be the year 2089 before we achieved our objective assuming we proceed at the pace of 16 projects a day.

How would the green building industry grow if the United States Green Building Council (USGBC) did a major overhaul to a more user-friendly, economical LEED system and how could that impact USGBC income and recognition over the next decade? The opportunity is enormous, but is USGBC leadership capable? To their credit, and even if they don't recognize it, USGBC has already accomplished the most difficult part. USGBC put together a system which, I believe, incorporates excellent building science based on input from thousands of experienced professionals throughout the industry. This was no easy matter. While attending the first USGBC annual meeting in 1994 all of us recognized that green buildings, while being the future of the industry, would also be extremely difficult to define given all of the conflicting professional opinions. Try asking a group of 100 tax experts what a fair tax system would look like and you will see the problem. Consensus is an extremely difficult thing to achieve and the more people know, the more difficult it becomes.

Despite the size of the initial challenge, I do believe the LEED system has done something that is close to impossible: Boil building science down into its essential categories and components and detail how each building, from the site it sits on to the materials that make it up, can be made greener and more sustainable. Thank you USGBC for this incredible gift! So, with that compliment put forward, let's get down to discussing the real problem: That dreadful interface that your computer geeks put together, an interface that is essential for joining users to the science, but has rendered certification something that becomes a matter of "spending hundreds of thousands of dollars for a plaque" as many owners and developers have come to say about LEED.

It doesn't have to be like this. Several years ago my company constructed three (3) buildings in Madison which have been dual-certified through the LEED and the Green Globes® systems. The LEED Version at that time was 2.1. Although that version of LEED was much more user-friendly than the current version, it still involved quite a bit of paperwork and time. One job had three notebooks of information required for LEED certification. I showed these to my peers to see if I was being overzealous in my documentation. They looked at the stack of notebooks and said "Only three?" so I guess my documentation wasn't excessive after all. Nevertheless, I did

have the chance to sit down with the architect on one of those buildings and said how it was a shame that so much documentation was required since the same common-sense, green elements were present in all of the dual-certified buildings and those elements could be easily described and documented on a few 8-1/2 by 11 pages of paper.

I have issued many complaints to USGBC about their interface. By now, when USGBC sees "fire your web site developer" in any email they must automatically state something to the effect of "This must be from Eric" although I have no doubt they give me other names that I can put in print. My goal is not to destroy LEED, but to make it mainstream. I envision a market where 1% of all commercial buildings would file for certification each year which would be an eight-fold increase in business for USGBC. Is that motivation for change? So what could be done to make the LEED interface as good as the science it links users to? Here is my idea:

Do a Beta test on the next version of LEED well before it is released for public use. Pay five design and construction professionals to be the Beta testers. Ideally, these professionals would be a mix of PE's and AIA's with at least five years of design/construction experience but no more than ten years of experience. Select people who just passed their LEED-AP exams but have not filed a LEED project yet. Give each of them one project that went all the way through to certification. Don't show the Beta testers completed templates or answers to the USGBC inquiries, just the first round of on-line attachments all put into an unsorted pile. Have the Beta testers upload the attachments and complete the templates with no help other than the LEED guides. Remember, these are LEED AP people so they are already trained according to USGBC. See what issues these people have particularly after they look at the canned review comments that haunted the people who originally filed the jobs for certification. Do the same for the subsequent submittals making sure the Beta testers are not allowed to see the final resolutions, completed templates, to any of the inquiries. Believe me, 90% of the problems with the LEED interface will surface to be corrected before release. And, if your web developer won't make the needed changes based on the Beta testers' complaints, fire the web developer! I just can't say that enough.

What is the current track that LEED is on? According to the person I quoted in the first paragraph (the sole supporter of LEED) LEED was developed as a system so that any building filing for certification was designed to be rejected 3 out of 4 times. I understand that to be a certified green building the system must document upgrades that go beyond code and, in many cases, beyond standard practice with a rigorous means of making sure these green features are in place. But, does USGBC really want to promote a system that encourages an elite membership in some type of old boys club that consists only of owners and developers who are willing to pay hundreds of thousands of dollars for a plaque in their building, particularly when the odds of success are only 1 in 4? I think LEED can be salvaged to do much better than that. What do you think?

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