

DO YOU HAVE TO BE LEED TO BE GREEN?

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The green building standard most commonly applied to today's commercial and residential projects is USGBC's LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certification, but do you really have to be LEED to be Green? The constraints of the LEED framework have created opportunities for new green building standards to be developed and have influenced LEED's evolution.

Builders and developers are no longer limited to LEED in the design and construction of their green projects.

LEED's constraints

During Carlisle Development Group's design and construction of Tallman Pines, the first LEED Silver-certified affordable housing development in the Southeast U.S., the LEED V 2.2 framework had to be adapted to a multifamily product. The V 2.2 framework was developed with commercial (office, industrial, retail) applications in mind and efficiencies (lighting, HVAC) based on larger, open interior spaces and building automation capabilities.

These features aren't wholly applicable to multifamily construction and were one of the limiting factors with which we had to contend.

Other constraints inherent in the outgoing version of LEED were the application of a single green building standard across all regions of the country, spanning urban, suburban and rural project sites. Different localities have different priorities for green building that generate disparate environmental and economic impacts, and the framework needed to become more regionalized to reflect that.

LEED's evolution

On April 27th, 2009, the USGBC rolled out Version 3 of the LEED rating system for new construction, incorporating more flexibility for different construction types and regional concerns. The primary changes included in the new 100-point system emphasize CO2 emissions, the longevity of materials and a regionally weighted credit system.

Reduction of CO2 emissions created during building construction and long-term operation was given a much heavier weighting in the new system. For example, the weighting of proximity to public transportation was doubled. This factor directly affects the carbon footprint of a building and its users and should be a priority in site selection.

For multifamily developers and property managers, product longevity makes both environmental and economic sense. The "Building Assembly Life Cycle Assessment" credit will incentivize developers to focus on the creation of long-lasting products and solutions that add value to their product.

The most exciting facet of LEED V3 is the regionally weighted credit system defined by zip code. For example, in urban Florida, weight was given to reduction in CO2 emissions and harnessing the power of the state's most abundant renewable resource—sunshine. By contrast, in rural Michigan, green building priorities are different and focus was placed on natural habitat preservation and an enhanced focus on storm water quality that affects one of Michigan's most precious resources—the Great Lakes.

Alternative building standards

In 2007, the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB) and the International Code Council (ICC) teamed to develop a National Green Building Standard. The partnership sought to provide a framework better suited to single- and multifamily home construction, site development and residential remodeling practices. The new standard places heavy emphasis on energy efficiency, indoor environmental quality, and responsible lot design and development.

A particular emphasis has also been placed on homeowner/resident education on green operation of their dwellings, which can have long-term effects on energy and resource efficiency. Last year, the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) approved ICC-700-2008 National Green Building Standard, a criteria that will facilitate green building's codification into all facets of building construction.

Older ICC and ANSI codes have been adopted by most U.S. cities, counties and states, and it is this infrastructure that will assist in the creation of a comprehensive green building code applicable to both residential and commercial construction.

The new ICC green building code is still in relative infancy, so a sustainable building technology committee has been convened to help refine and develop the most comprehensive and efficient code possible with input from green building professionals and municipalities nationwide. Their end goal is a regulatory framework that is comprehensive enough to be relevant anywhere across the country and can be codified easily by municipalities pursuing more environmentally friendly communities.

The future

Confining a project to a singular green building criteria is a limiting factor. A project-specific approach really needs to be taken, regardless of what certification you are pursuing. Confining yourself to one standard or another may cause you to overlook efficiencies that could maximize your projects economic and environmental benefit.

A truly green project looks for opportunities to maximize efficiency and minimize impact at every level. Looking outside the chosen certification framework culminates in the best green practice available. Green building is not about how many LEED points you tally, but the efficiency and viability of construction and long-term operation. Green building certification frameworks should serve as a guide and not a constraint. You don't have to be LEED to be green.

Thanks,
Bryce Bornemeier | **Builders Enterprises**
6464 Downing Street | Denver, CO 80229
303.288.4214 | 303.287.1922 Fax | 303.601.7691 Mobile
Bryce.Bornemeier@Buildersne.com