

People, Not Points

THE REAL REASON FOR BUILDING GREEN IS PEOPLE.

By Rachel R. Belew

Now, more than ever before, green building is critical to sustaining our well-being and quality of life. Research showing the negative effects of climate change and environmental pollution on human health and well-being is mounting — and unfortunately, buildings are one of the biggest environmental offenders. According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), buildings in the U.S. alone account for 68 percent of electricity consumption, 39 percent of energy use, and 38 percent of all carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions. According to the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC), U.S. buildings account for 40 percent of raw material use and 30 percent of waste output.

Of course, as environmental awareness grows, so does the demand for products and processes with minimal environmental impact. As a result, eco-friendly, energy-efficient built environments have started sprouting up in all four corners of the globe. In the U.S. alone, nonresidential green construction comprised 10 to 12 percent of the market in 2008; per USGBC estimates, it's expected to account for 20 to 25 percent in 2013.

The Original Intent

For architects, designers and builders in particular, green buildings are more than just Earth-friendly structures. They're also the culmination of a hard-run race to earn points for sustainable building credits. After all, certification from green building programs like Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) is highly prestigious. Why wouldn't you want to celebrate this achievement? It's a major accomplishment, indeed.

But the unprecedented growth in popularity of sustainable building and design has had an unfortunate side effect: The undermining of the importance of building occupants' health in favor of underscoring the importance of rating points and sustainable credits. "It's as if the building community has forgotten that the purpose of green building is, above anything else, to create healthy and productive built environments for their occupants," says Henning Bloech, executive director of the GREENGUARD Environmental Institute. "Consequently, we've allowed the quality of our indoor air to become a mere afterthought to accumulating credits and points."



A Forgotten Piece of the Sustainable Puzzle

Paradoxically, many of the "green" tactics used in building and design (such as single attributes like recycled content or rapidly renewable materials and tighter insulation for energy efficiency) can create elevated levels of indoor airborne volatile organic compounds (VOCs) and other pollutants. This is because the materials off-gas into practically airtight buildings, allowing chemicals and other environmental pollutants to build up inside.

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"Unless those 'green' materials and products have been evaluated — and preferably certified — by a third-party for low chemical emissions, and unless we adequately ventilate our energy-efficient buildings, the airborne pollutants that these products emit get trapped indoors," Bloech explains. "How we've forgotten this critical piece of the sustainability puzzle is just mind-boggling to me."

A recent California study that examined chemical emissions and air-change rates in

new energy-efficient homes concluded that most homeowners never open their windows for ventilation. What's worse, the study also found that pollutant levels inside these homes far exceeded recommended exposure guidelines.

The study, conducted by building science consulting firm Indoor Environmental Engineering, illustrates an inconvenient truth about "green" building nowadays: In our quest to earn the highly coveted LEED and similar program points, we often put human health in jeopardy. The irony is palpable: What good is a "sustainable" building if, ultimately, it can't sustain human life?

The Real Value

Sure, green buildings are important. In fact, they're crucial. But the truth is, green certifications and high-style interior designs mean nothing if they don't keep us out of harm's way. "If we want to be truly eco-savvy, then we must remember that people and their health come first," says Marilyn Black, founder of the GREENGUARD Environmental Institute. "It's about the people, not the points." [ecdfc](#)



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