

WHAT IS A GREEN BUILDING?

Fundamental Principles of Green Building and Sustainable Site Design

Defining Green...

There are many definitions of what a green building is or does. Definitions may range from a building that is “not as bad” as the average building in terms of its impact on the environment or one that is “notably better” than the average building, to one that may even represent a regenerative process where there is actually an improvement and restoration of the site and its surrounding environment. The ideal “green” project preserves and restores habitat that is vital for sustaining life and becomes a net producer and exporter of resources, materials, energy and water rather than being a net consumer. A green building is one whose construction and lifetime of operation assure the healthiest possible environment while representing the most efficient and least disruptive use of land, water, energy and resources. The optimum design solution is one that effectively emulates all of the natural systems and conditions of the pre-developed site – after development is complete.

Breaking the Myth that Green Always Costs More...

While many green materials and technologies do cost more, it has been demonstrated that many green strategies and technologies actually cost the same and some even cost less than traditional “not-so-green” technologies. By blending the right mix of green technologies that cost less with green technologies that cost the same or slightly more, it is possible to have a very green building project that costs the same as a conventional one. Often the key to a cost effective green building and site design lies within the interrelationships and associated cost and performance trade-offs that exist between different building systems. For example, the use of high performance windows and window frames increases the first cost of the building envelope, however the resulting reduction in the size and cost of the buildings heating and cooling system more than offsets the added cost of the better glazing system. The result is a building that has a comparable or perhaps even a lower first cost, a higher comfort level, lower energy use, and lower energy bills and operating cost for the life of the building. The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (PA/DEP) recently completed two green buildings – the DEP South Central Regional Office Building in Harrisburg, PA, (USGBC LEED Bronze certified) and the DEP Southwestern Regional Mining Office in Cambria, PA, (USGBC LEED Gold certified), that are living examples of cost effective green building projects.

Decision to Build Green...

It is critical to make the decision to build a green building early in the design process in order to maximize the green potential, minimize redesign, and assure the overall success and economic viability of the green elements of the building project. Making a commitment to build green and establishing firm environmental objectives for the project must be done as early as possible because opportunities for incorporating green technologies and design solutions become less and less available and increasingly costly to implement as the project design and construction process progresses. Ideally, the decision to build green should be made before the site is selected, as many of the green criteria are affected by site characteristics and some sites are inappropriate for certain green projects.

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Setting Green Goals and Objectives...

Once the decision to build green has been made, one of the first steps in the green design process is to establish firm environmental goals for the project. This is often done during what is called a goal setting or targeting session. During this session, it is important to set specific measurable goals for things like energy efficiency, water conservation, on-site treatment of rain water and storm water, material and resource management, construction waste management, and to assign responsibility for meeting these goals to specific members of the design team. Each goal needs a champion who will see that objective through to the end. If the building is to be built in accordance with the United States Green Building Council (USGBC) Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) green building rating system, it will be helpful to review the requirements of LEED as part of the green project goal setting session, begin targeting which elements of LEED are going to be pursued, and establish firm criteria for meeting those goals.

Building a Green Team...

Hiring a design team with prior green design experience is highly desirable, but not essential provided that the design team is augmented with architects or engineering consultants who do have experience in green building and site design principles and technologies. The collective knowledge, experience, and dedication of the design team will determine the overall success of the green project. All members of the green team should participate in the project goal setting session. Once the goal setting process has been completed it may become obvious that meeting certain goals may require expertise that lies outside the current design team. Specialized consultants may need to be engaged for specific elements of the design and construction process or to oversee all elements of the green design program. These specialists will be able to bring new ideas and solutions to the table for consideration and should be included in the project as early as possible.

Integrated Design Process...

Building a green building is not just a matter of assembling a collection of the latest green technologies or materials. Rather, it is a process in which every element of the design is first optimized and then the impact and interrelationship of various different elements and systems within the building and site are re-evaluated, integrated, and optimized as part of a whole building solution. For example, interrelationships between the building site, site features, the path of the sun, and the location and orientation of the building and elements such as windows and external shading devices have a significant impact on the quality and effectiveness of natural daylighting. These elements also affect direct solar loads and overall energy performance for the life of the building. Without considering these issues early in the design process, the design is not fully optimized and the result is likely to be a very inefficient building. This same emphasis on integrated and optimized design is inherent in nearly every aspect of the building from site planning and use of on-site storm water management strategies to envelope design and detailing and provisions for natural ventilation of the building. This integrated design process mandates that all of the design professionals work cooperatively towards common goals from day one.

Overview of the Five Elements of a Green Building Project...

The following pages summarize key principles, strategies and technologies which are associated with the five major elements of green building design which are: Sustainable Site Design; Water Conservation and Quality; Energy and Environment; Indoor Environmental Quality; and Conservation of Materials and Resources. This information supports the use of the USGBC LEED Green Building Rating System, but focuses on principles and strategies rather than specific solutions or technologies, which are often site specific and will vary from project to project. For more information on the USGBC LEED rating system – visit www.usgbc.org.

Fundamental Principles of Green Building and Sustainable Site Design

Sustainable Site Design

Key Principles:

Minimize urban sprawl and needless destruction of valuable land, habitat and green space, which results from inefficient low-density development. Encourage higher density urban development, urban re-development and urban renewal, and brownfield development as a means to preserve valuable green space. Preserve key environmental assets through careful examination of each site. Engage in a design and construction process that minimizes site disturbance and which values, preserves and actually restores or regenerates valuable habitat, green space and associated eco-systems that are vital to sustaining life.

Key Strategies and Technologies:

- Make more efficient use of space in existing occupied buildings, renovate and re-use existing vacant buildings, sites, and associated infrastructure and consider re-development of brownfield sites. Design buildings and renovations to maximize future flexibility and reuse thereby expanding useful life.
- When new development is unavoidable, steer clear of sites that play a key role in the local or regional ecosystem. Identify and protect valuable greenfield and wetland sites from development.
- Recognize that allowing higher density development in urban areas helps to preserve green space and reduce urban sprawl. Invest time and energy in seeking variances and regulatory reform where needed.
- Evaluate each site in terms of the location and orientation of buildings and improvements in order to optimize the use of passive solar energy, natural daylighting, and natural breezes and ventilation.
- Make best use of existing mass transit systems and make buildings and sites pedestrian and bike friendly, including provisions for safe storage of bicycles. Develop programs and incentives that promote car-pooling including preferred parking for commuters who carpool. Consider making provisions for re-fueling or recharging alternative fuel vehicles.
- Help reduce the urban heat island effect by reducing the building and site development footprint, maximizing the use of pervious surfaces, and using light colored roofs, paving, and walkways. Provide natural shading of buildings and paved areas with trees and other landscape features.
- Reduce impervious areas by carefully evaluating parking and roadway design. Pursue variances or waivers where local ordinances may unintentionally result in the over-design of roadways or parking.
- Optimize the use of on-site storm water treatment and ground water recharge. Minimize the boundaries of the construction area, avoid needless compaction of existing topsoil, and provide effective sedimentation and silt control during all phases of site development and construction.
- Use landscape design to preserve and restore the region's natural habitat and heritage while emphasizing the use of indigenous, hardy, drought resistant trees, shrubs, plants and turf.
- Help reduce night-time light pollution by avoiding over-illumination of the site and use low cut-off exterior lighting fixtures which direct light downward, not upward and outward.

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Water Quality and Conservation

Key Principles:

Preserve the existing natural water cycle and design site and building improvements such that they closely emulate the site's natural "pre-development" hydrological systems. Emphasis should be placed on retention of storm water and on-site infiltration and ground water recharge using methods that closely emulate natural systems. Minimize the unnecessary and inefficient use of potable water on the site while maximizing the recycling and reuse of water, including harvested rainwater, storm water, and gray water.

Key Strategies and Technologies:

- Recognize that the least costly, least time consuming and most environmentally preferable design for site and storm water management is often the one in which the design of buildings and site improvements respect the existing natural flows and features of the land, instead of designing the building and site improvements with total disregard for the site, which results in needless, extensive, disruptive, costly and time consuming excavation and earthmoving.
- Conduct a thorough site assessment and strategically locate buildings and site improvements so as to preserve key natural hydrological features. Special effort should be made to preserve areas of the site that serve as natural storm water retention and ground water infiltration and recharge systems. Preserve existing forest and mature vegetation that play a vital role in the natural water cycle by absorbing and disbursing up to 30% of a site's rainwater through evapo-transpiration.
- Minimize the building's footprint, site improvements and construction area, and minimize excavation, soil disturbance and compaction of existing topsoil as this soil in its natural uncompacted state serves a vital role in absorbing and storing up to 80% of natural rainfall until it can be absorbed by vegetation or enter the site's natural sub-surface ground water system.
- Design and locate buildings and site improvements to optimize use of low-impact storm water technologies such as bio-retention, rain gardens, open grassy swales, pervious bituminous paving, pervious concrete paving and walkways, constructed wetlands, living/vegetated roofs, and other technologies that support on-site retention and ground water recharge or evapo-transpiration. Storm water that leaves the site should be filtered and processed naturally or mechanically to remove trash and debris, oil, grit and suspended solids. Use "hold and release" technologies such as dry retention ponds only as a last resort as these technologies do not preserve the natural water cycle, have little or no benefit in terms of ground water recharge and result in needless additional site disturbance.
- Establish a water budget for the building and implement a design that minimizes the use of potable water by using low-flow plumbing fixtures and toilets and waterless urinals. Harvest, process and recycle rainwater, site storm water, and building gray water and identify appropriate uses within the building and site. Use on-site treatment systems that enable use of rain water for hand washing, gray-water for toilet flushing, rain and storm water for site irrigation, cooling tower make-up and other uses.
- Conserve water and preserve site and ground water quality by using only indigenous, drought resistant and hardy trees, shrubs, plants and turf that require no irrigation, fertilizers, pesticides or herbicides.

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Energy and Environment

Key Principles:

Minimize adverse impacts on the environment (air, water, land, natural resources) through optimized building siting, optimized building design, material selection, and aggressive use of energy conservation measures. Resulting building performance should exceed minimum International Energy Code (IEC) compliance level by 30 to 40% or more. Maximize the use of renewable energy and other low impact energy sources.

Key Strategies and Technologies:

- Optimize passive solar orientation, building massing and use of external shading devices such that the design of the building minimizes undesirable solar gains during the summer months while maximizing desirable solar gains during winter months.
- Optimize building orientation, massing, shape, design, and interior colors and finishes in order to maximize the use of controlled natural day lighting which significantly reduces artificial lighting energy use thereby reducing the buildings internal cooling load and energy use. Consider the use of light shelf technology.
- Use high performance low-e glazing, which can result in significant year round energy savings. Consider insulated double glazing, triple glazing or double pane glazing with a suspended low-e film. Selective coatings offer optimal light transmittance while providing minimal solar gain and minimal heat transmission. Window frames, sashes and curtain wall systems should also be designed for optimum energy performance including the use of multiple thermal breaks to help reduce energy use.
- Optimize the value of exterior insulation and the overall thermal performance of the exterior envelope assembly. Consider advanced/high performance envelope building systems such as structural insulated panel systems (SIPS) and insulated concrete form systems (ICF's) that can be applied to light commercial and institutional buildings. SIPS and ICF's and other thermally "decoupled" envelope systems will offer the highest energy performance.
- Use energy efficient T-8 and T-5 bulbs, high efficiency electronic ballasts, and lighting controls. Consider using indirect ambient lighting with workstation based direct task lighting to improve light quality, reduce glare and improve overall energy performance in general office areas. Incorporate sensors and controls and design circuits so that lighting along perimeter zones and offices can be switched off independently from other interior lights when daylighting is sufficient in perimeter areas.
- Use state-of-the art, high efficiency, heating, ventilation and air conditioning (HVAC) and plumbing equipment, chillers, boilers, and water heaters, etc. Use variable speed drives on fan and pump motors. Use heat recovery ventilators and geothermal heat pump technology for up to 40% energy savings.
- Avoid the use of HCFC and Halon based refrigeration, cooling and fire suppression systems. Optimize the use of natural ventilation and where practical use evaporative cooling, waste heat and/or solar regenerated desiccant dehumidification or absorption cooling. Identify and use sources of waste energy.
- Use Energy Star certified energy efficient appliances, office equipment, lighting and HVAC systems.
- Consider on-site small-scale wind, solar, and/or fuel cell based energy generation and co-generation. Purchase environmentally preferable "green" power from certified renewable and sustainable sources.

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Indoor Environmental Quality

Key Principles:

Provide a healthy, comfortable and productive indoor environment for building occupants and visitors. Provide a building design, which affords the best possible conditions in terms of indoor air quality, ventilation, thermal comfort, access to natural ventilation and daylighting, and effective control of the acoustical environment.

Key Strategies and Technologies:

- Use building materials, adhesives, sealants, finishes and furnishings which do not contain, harbor, generate or release any particulate or gaseous contaminants including volatile organic compounds.
- Maximize the use of natural daylighting. Optimize solar orientation and design the building to maximize penetration of natural daylight into interior spaces. Provide shades or daylight controls where needed.
- Maximize the use of operable windows and natural ventilation. Provide dedicated engineered ventilation systems that operate independently of the buildings heating and cooling system. Ventilation systems should be capable of effectively removing or treating indoor contaminants while providing adequate amounts of fresh clean make-up air to all occupants and all regions of the building. Monitor indoor air conditions including temperature, humidity and carbon dioxide levels, so that building ventilation systems can respond when space conditions fall outside the optimum range.
- Provide a smoke free building. When smoking must be accommodated, provide completely dedicated smoking areas are physically isolated, have dedicated HVAC systems, and remain under negative pressure with respect to all adjoining spaces. Assure that air from smoking areas does not get distributed to other areas of the building does not re-enter the building through doors or vestibules, operable windows, or building fresh air intakes.. Locate outdoor smoking areas so that non-smokers do not have to pass through these areas when using primary building entrances or exits.
- Design building envelope and environmental systems that not only treat air temperature and provide adequate ventilation, but which respect all of the environmental conditions which affect human thermal comfort and health, including the mean radiant temperature of interior surfaces, indoor air humidity, indoor air velocity, and indoor air temperature. Following these principles and providing a building that is also responsive to seasonal variations in desirable indoor humidity levels, air velocity, and mean radiant temperatures can also result in significant energy savings as improved occupant comfort results in less energy intensive operation of the buildings air-side heating and cooling system.
- Maximize occupant health, comfort and performance by providing occupants with individual space/zone control of heat, ventilation, cooling, day-lighting and artificial lighting whenever possible.
- Prevent contamination of the building during construction. Take steps to minimize the creation and spreading of construction dust and dirt. Prevent contamination of the building and the buildings heating, cooling and ventilation systems during the construction process. Protect construction materials from the elements so that they do not become damp, moldy or mildewed.
- Provide a clean and healthy building. Use biodegradable and environmentally friendly cleaning agents that do not release VOCs or other harmful agents and residue. Prior to occupancy install new air filters and clean any contaminated ductwork and ventilation equipment. Use fresh outdoor air to naturally or mechanically purge the building of any remaining airborne gaseous or particulate contaminants.

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Materials and Resources

Key Principles:

Minimize the use of non-renewable construction materials and other resources such as energy and water through efficient engineering, design, planning and construction and effective recycling of construction debris. Maximize the use of recycled content materials, modern resource efficient engineered materials, and resource efficient composite type structural systems wherever possible. Maximize the use of re-usable, renewable, sustainably managed, bio-based materials. Remember that human creativity and our abundant labor force is perhaps our most valuable renewable resource. The best solution is not necessarily the one that requires the least amount of physical work.

Key Strategies and Technologies:

- Optimize the use of engineered materials which make use of proven engineering principles such as engineered trusses, composite materials and structural systems (concrete/steel, other...), structural insulated panels (stress skin panels), insulated concrete forms, and frost protected shallow foundations which have been proven to provide high strength and durability with the least amount of material.
- Identify ways to reduce the amount of materials used and reduce the amount of waste generated through the implementation of a construction waste reduction plan. Adopt a policy of “waste equals food” whereby 75% or more of all construction waste is separated for recycling and used as feedstock for some future product rather than being landfilled. Implement an aggressive construction waste recycling program and provide separate, clearly labeled dumpsters for each recycled material. Train all crews and subcontractors on the policy and enforce compliance.
- Identify ways to use high-recycled content materials in the building structure and finishes. Consider everything from blended concrete using fly ash, slag, recycled concrete aggregate, or other admixtures to recycled content materials such as structural steel, ceiling and floor tiles, carpeting, carpet padding, sheathing, and gypsum wallboard. Consider remanufactured office furniture and office partition systems, chairs and furniture with recycled content or parts.
- Explore the use of bio-based materials and finishes such as various types of agriboard (sheathing and or insulation board made from agricultural waste and byproducts, including straw, wheat, barley, soy, sunflower shells, peanut shells, and other materials). Some structural insulated panels are now made from bio-based materials. Use lumber and wood products from certified forests where the forest is managed and lumber is harvested using sustainable practices. Use resource efficient engineered wood products in lieu of full dimension lumber which comes from older growth forests.
- Evaluate all products and systems used for their ability to be recycled when they reach the end of their useful life. Preference should be given to products and systems that facilitate easy, non-energy intensive separation and recycling with minimal contamination by foreign debris.
- Recognize that transportation becomes part of a product or building materials embodied energy. Where practical, specify and use locally harvested, mined and manufactured materials and products to support the regional economy and to reduce transportation, energy use and emissions.