

When Green Goes Away

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Green is going away. Not the color, so your kid's next box of Crayola crayons is safe. Not cash, dough, moolah or whatever other shorthand for US dollar bills you use despite all the stories predicting its demise throughout the years. Within 5 to 7 years the term 'Green' used to describe buildings, processes or industries will, like Monty Python's dead parrot, "cease to be". This is not because the issues that have given rise to the current wave of Green building will have gone, been solved or no longer matter but almost due to the exact opposite being the case. Green or sustainable buildings have emerged in part because of and as a response to 'not Green' buildings.

Why is it leaving? Green is leaving precisely because it is so popular. Green was, at its beginning, shorthand for describing an idea or underlying principle at the core of a project, process or product. It is rare today to see a new project or product that does not tout, embrace or embellish some sort of 'Green-ness' that places it above whatever it was you were using before. Obviously the steady rollout by states and municipalities to enact some sort of 'Green building' legislation helps fuel this shift, but in many instances the legislative push is actually being pulled by the industry instead of the other way around. And industry is being drawn by the marketplace. Sustainability is not a fad nor is it likely to lose its steam with a sudden drop in energy prices. People, many people, too many people are looking at this as an issue even if they are not always buying into Green claims made by manufacturers.

Green or sustainable thinking is slowly permeating our discussions about everything we do from buildings to industry to agriculture to financial systems and even professional services. As that idea becomes more commonly accepted or integrated into the fabric of society – expected instead of requested – there will no longer be a need to distinguish Green as the 'alternative' approach. Soon the alternative to Green – "not Green" – will no longer be a viable alternative. Green will not be pushed off the stage so much as becoming part of the stage itself.

“Green” and its mirror image, ‘not green’ will be replaced by an old, yet persistent idea or principle – good, better and unacceptable. There should be no ‘best’ because that limits the possibility of what can be done by what has been done. Unacceptable will be doing things the way we have been doing things...until we started to do them better.

In the realm of buildings (and by extension the people that circulate in that realm) placards and platitudes are being replaced by performance and this performance is being recorded, measured, analyzed and compared to what was promised during the rah-rah portion of the sales speech. The EU already has a Building Energy Labeling¹ program which is mandatory for any building over 1000 m² and ASHRAE in the US is working on a comparable system for rollout this year². This performance metric will be a reportable and quantifiable value which can be used to objectively compare energy performance between buildings. The International Code Council, the organization that creates the building codes used throughout the US, is working on a standard methodology to determine how “green” a green product is, stripping the varnish off of “green-washed” goods and products³.

Life Cycle, embedded energy and cradle-to-cradle analyses will begin to put metrics on environmental footprints and alleged carbon neutrality. These numbers have begun to find their way on to balance sheets and into annual reports in more meaningful ways than pictures of polar bears and contributions to environmental fundraisers. Major financial ratings institutions are looking at a corporation’s exposure to carbon costs and climate change when evaluating market good will, long term strategies and financial ratings⁴. Triple bottom line analyses have left B-school lecture halls and have become a metric in corporate competency comparisons.

How does this change the landscape for design, construction and operations? Designers must be cognizant of heightened client expectations and an ever-rising standard of care. Can you provide sustainable, considered and cost conscious design on Project A and provide lowest common

¹ **European Commission Directorate- General for Energy and Transport** - “Energy Performance of Buildings Directive”
<http://www.buildingsplatform.org/cms/>

² **American Society of Heating, Refrigeration and Air-Conditioning Engineers (ASHRAE)** Building Energy Labeling Program http://www.ashrae.org/doclib/20080714_abelreport_july2008.pdf

³ **International Code Council (ICC)** ICC-ES Sustainable Attributes Verification and Evaluation (SAVE™) Program.
<http://www.iccsafe.org/news/Green/>

⁴ **Sustainability Investment News: “Does Trucost Measurement of Corporate Carbon Footprints Reduce Environmental Impacts?”** by Bill Baue (July 2006) <http://www.socialfunds.com/news/article.cgi/article2046.html>

World Resources Institute Report: “Sharpening The Cutting Edge: Corporate Action for a Strong, Low-Carbon Economy” - Samantha Putt del Pino, Eliot Metzger, John Larsen April 2009

denominator work on Project B? Is a firm capable of performing to two potential ‘standards of care’ within the same organization?

Contractors need to consider the fact that sustainability cannot be measured within the typical “one [year] and done” context of ‘before’ and that their work is critical to long term satisfaction if not success. With an actionable and traceable building performance report card that lives for and through the transfer of ownership the terms ‘custom and practice’ and ‘latent defect’ take on a whole new meaning.

For owners, operational intelligence is essential and fiduciary responsibility cannot be measured only from quarter to quarter. Can that occur effectively with an arm’s length approach to the mundane worlds of chiller plant operation and waste management strategies? You may not be able to outsource your accountability. This shift to a more holistic consideration of ‘market impacts’ may move traditional cost centers from corporate backwaters to corner offices with a panoramic view. Would it not be reasonable to imagine some standard to which owners could be expected to perform?

As measurement and verification of performance becomes more commonplace and compared to ‘the promise’, there may be more instances when actual and predicted performance are debated long after occupancy and this will create a value for accuracy and traceability. Design professionals should be mindful of the promises they make regarding performance and how that affects their potential liabilities and their insurance coverage. Construction professionals may wish to re-think the hands-off attitude too frequently held with regard to training operators prior to turnover and less than ideal installations which can interfere with on-going maintenance. Owners should actively consider their roles in successful facility operations and how they keep track of that data and convert it to bottom line results.

As Green becomes the base color upon which activity is measured consider how well your decision making process is engaged with the sustainability metrics bubbling up in the marketplace and quantifying good, better and unacceptable. Being informed, prepared and engaged can help you to capitalize on the competitive advantages that sustainability can provide. Remember, at least one ‘green’ – cash – is going to be here for a long time and how well you address sustainability issues will impact your ‘green’.