

A Strategic View of Sustainability

BY NELLIE REID

Green adds value—long-term environmental, social, and economic value. This is the growing consensus, and it's starting to reshape the office real estate market.

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Green design hasn't fully taken hold yet in the world of office real estate, but it's moving to the forefront. By the end of the decade, it's safe to predict that the market will have shifted and that an array of sustainable features will be standard in new office buildings.

The main catalyst for this is the U.S. Green Building Council's LEED Rating System, which provides a uniform way to measure building sustainability. LEED provides a comprehensive array of green building strategies, but it leaves it up to each design team to answer the basic question, "Which strategies are appropriate for this project?"

This is why Gensler begins the design process with a "Performance Map" workshop. The mapping process is a way to help clients explore the outcomes they expect from the project. It encourages them to be explicit about performance and how to measure it, and to look beyond financial and operational issues to ask how it can bolster productivity by better supporting people and teams.

Getting Green on the Map

Mapping their performance expectations helps clients correlate the impacts of different green strategies with their performance goals for the project in a larger sense. Using the map also brings home the point that sustainable measures often reinforce each other to provide greater benefits together than each measure would on its own. There is still a tendency to see the payoffs of sustainability in terms of building efficiency, but a healthy building can also enhance human and organizational performance—for example, by reducing days lost to illness, and by making it easier for organizations to attract and retain

talent. Increased efficiency is important, but even small gains in personal and organizational performance can have a much greater impact. A one percent gain in productivity represents an annual payback of around \$3 per square-foot, while the energy efficiency gains that are typical of green buildings today generate about a sixth of that, around 50¢ per square-foot.

Redefining “Investment Grade”

The added value that sustainable design can deliver is a reason for developers and their corporate clients to consider updating the concept of “Class A” or investment grade office buildings, Gensler’s Rob Jernigan believes. “The marketplace is ready to accept slightly higher construction costs—one or two percent—for enhanced performance.”

This extends to speculative core-and-shell office buildings, he argues. Even when tenants don’t have a direct financial incentive to embrace them, “they and their employees have a clear expectation today for a healthy work environment. Green will be a differentiator.”

Four Tiers Toward Sustainability

LEED organizes the different strategies that make up its ratings by categories like site, water, energy, materials, and indoor environmental quality. Yet it is sometimes unclear to the client and design team which strategies have a lower impact on project cost, which require some additional time and investment, and which are more of a reach.

So our approach to green building strategies gives our clients an organizational framework based on how likely they are to be achieved. We start with a baseline—strategies that can be implemented at little or no cost on any project, regardless of location. Then we go up from there.

The adjacent chart gives an abbreviated list of the strategies appropriate to each tier. Organizing them in this way lets us begin a conversation early on with our clients about the green design aspects of the project. They usually end up choosing strategies from several tiers, but we find that seeing them this way first helps them prioritize.

What’s Right for You?

A building is an investment, and sustainability is one aspect of the investment strategy that sets it in motion and determines its qualities and features. The relevant questions are the traditional ones for a project of this scale: How will it contribute strategically to the goals of your organization? What are your specific expectations for its performance?

Sustainability enjoys much more acceptance today among mainstream organizations. This reflects how many of them have begun to connect the dots, recognizing how modest increases in first costs can—with a clear set of sustainable strategies—pay off for them in terms of lower operating costs, and higher productivity and resale value.

Basic Practices

- ASHRAE 90.1 energy performance
- CFC reduction in heating and cooling
- Daylighting strategies
- High-efficiency fluorescent lights
- Recycled content materials
- Low-emission paints, finishes, carpets

Good Practices

- California Title 24 energy performance
- Cool roof/green roof
- Water conserving plumbing fixtures
- High-performance glazing/cladding
- 100% outside air economizer cycle
- Ambient lighting/sensor controls
- Basic building commissioning

Best Practices

- Under-floor air supply
- Personal environmental controls
- Operable windows
- FSC certified wood products
- Indoor air quality (IAQ) testing
- Third-party building commissioning

Transforming Practices

- CO2 balancing
- Double-skin façade
- On-site renewable energy systems
- On-site wastewater treatment
- Ongoing energy service contracts
- Net energy producer
- Continuous commissioning

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