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How young design professionals are contributing to the future of green design and re-thinking the process

By Joseph Snider



Illustration by Tom Salamone

"The young do not know enough to be prudent, and therefore they attempt the impossible—and achieve it, generation after generation."—Pearl S. Buck

These days everyone in the building industry is becoming familiar with terms like LEED, off-gassing, and post-consumer versus post-industrial recycled content. Where do young designers fit into this growing movement?

First, today's young designer characterizes him or herself as an environmentally and socially conscious professional, as opposed to viewing a project separately through a "green" lens. Emerging professionals and students seek to learn green design and get LEED accredited long before they ever actually work on a green building. With this shift in design consciousness, every project is green, whereas in the past, the green design approach might have been reserved only for "green" buildings. This approach will surely transform the design profession, as this next generation becomes the lead designers and firm principals of the future.

One Santa Fe, N.M., intern recently added to a firm took it upon himself to get LEED accredited, bringing a new dimension to the office. In turn, the firm started introducing LEED to clients, as well as add this credential to proposals and marketing materials. A client soon came along with whom the LEED process fit. Two years later, with legislation having been passed in the interim that mandates LEED construction at the state and local levels, the firm has completed construction on what will likely be the first LEED-certified building in that city and the second in the state, and is beginning to evaluate how the lessons learned can be applied across the board to all projects in the office.

At Peckham Guyton Albers & Viets Architects in Kansas City, Mo., the firm was finding itself short on LEED experience as it submitted proposals for projects that required the certification. At around the same time, the office was expanding rapidly, and looking to build out office space for itself. It was an intern by the name of Jeremy Knoll who took the initiative to become LEED accredited and was keeping abreast of green building developments that pointed out the new LEED rating system for Commercial Interiors. The firm could apply LEED to their own office space, and in the process get the LEED experience they needed.

Yet being a young professional with green career goals is not always easy. Wanting to practice green design in a world of limited job opportunities and firms that are resistant and unsupportive can be difficult and demoralizing. In one instance an intern I know sought financial assistance to pay for his LEED accreditation exam and was turned down. Now, two years later, that same firm is using the intern's LEED credentials without any acknowledgment of the individual's initiative. Stories like this are why young professionals are turning to each other to keep themselves informed and inspired, while at the same time, looking for opportunities outside the office to instigate the transformation they want to see in their own profession.

That's where the Emerging Green Builders (EGB) comes in. The student and young volunteering professionals arm of the USGBC was developed as a response to the needs of this energetic and passionate demographic. The organization has been growing exponentially since its inception in 2003, and it now includes more than 60 local groups nationwide and in Canada, with thousands of individuals working together to educate their universities, communities, and workplaces about green building.

The EGB's 2006 Natural Talent Design Competition consists of 11 local design competitions from North Carolina to Northern California, with participants designing green buildings, often for real clients. These efforts are changing the local community landscapes one building at a time. For example, in Santa Fe, the EGB coordinated a design charrette for a new Boys and Girls Club, which inspired a University of New Mexico design studio project that has helped to invigorate the Club's capital campaign for the new facility. These efforts continue to raise awareness of green building, thus increasing demand and affordability, all of which lead to more clients coming into design offices requesting these services.

Young designers are working passionately both in their offices and communities, challenging the paradigms and pressing for a more sustainable design culture. It is not always easy to apply their passion and ideals in the workplace, yet they continue in the footsteps of those who inspired them and are, as Ghandi once said, becoming the change they want to see. ☐

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matter?

Joseph Snider, LEED AP



Position

Intern architect, Spears Architects, Santa Fe, N.M.

Education

B.A. English, Wittenberg University; M. Arch., M.S. Historic Preservation, University of Oregon

Notable projects

Santa Fe Preparatory School Library (currently applying for LEED Gold); Santa Fe Civic Center; Master Plan for Historic Property Development in Santa Fe; Santa Fe Boys and Girls Club New Facility Design Charrette.

What do you consider to be your greatest professional achievement so far?

Working with the Emerging Green Builders of the USGBC. I am amazed at what the organization has been able to become in such a short time, and I am constantly inspired by those around me. I don't really differentiate between my volunteer work and my paid job when it comes to green building—to me it is all working toward the same end.

What inspired your career choices?

The feeling that there had to be a better way to do things when it came to how we lived on this planet. I grew up in Washington, D.C., at a time when suburban sprawl was chewing up the countryside, while beautiful, functional, historic homes in resource-efficient neighborhoods with public transportation were being abandoned. Even as a kid it made no sense to me why we would be spreading further apart and being more chained to our cars in order to live in houses that were not nearly as nicely built or as beautiful. The exploration of the relationship between community and environmental degradation has evolved from a childhood question, to a career choice, to a passion.

Who taught you your most valuable lesson, and what was it?

While in architecture school camping out on a visit to our studio project site in Oregon, we went on a midnight beach stroll with our professor (and my advisor), Rob Pena. At the beach we split up and in the limited light it was difficult to see more than silhouettes. We saw a solitary figure standing in the water yelling at—or maybe with—the ocean. Soon he had us all doing it,

reminding all of us to connect with, communicate with, and find inspiration from the world around us—and in the process to not take ourselves too seriously.

From where do you draw your inspiration for design?

From simple and efficient solutions inspired by nature—systems that don't see obstacles, only assets, as natural systems often do. Curitiba, Brazil, was ready to turn its river into a concrete channel to control flooding. Instead, they turned the riverfront property into a public park, and the long-term costs of maintaining a controlled-flow channel system were negated. Also, Janine Benyus has sparked the Biomimicry movement that is helping us open our eyes to the lessons of natural systems. Could we learn something about building design in New Orleans by evaluating how the trees left standing handle high winds and heavy flooding? What can we learn about high-strength fiber from highly efficient spider webs?

How would your coworkers describe you?

Very passionate about my work—and perhaps a bit of an eco-zealot at times!

What frustrates you?

Watching the same things happen over and over again without even wondering if there was a better way. I see innovation everywhere except for in the building industry. The military strives to be faster, lighter, stronger. Technology reinvents itself every few years. Yet the basic construction of the average American house has changed little, if at all, in my lifetime.

What is the most fulfilling part of your job?

When a client gets truly excited about and invested in the environmental good that can come from a building. I loved it when a school we worked with recently incorporated the long-term building performance analysis into its science curriculum. The building will continue to educate for years to come.

How do you define success?

The peace that comes from knowing I have done the right thing to the best of my ability and knowledge.

When you're not at work, where would you most like to be?

With my wife, dog, and a guitar, on a beach at sunset.