



# Updating a City's DNA

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Russell Unger at the Urban Green Gala in 2011. © All rights reserved by Urban Green Council

An effort led by USGBC-New York garners dozens of building code changes that promise long-lasting environmental results.

On July 8, 2008, Urban Green Council — the New York Chapter of USGBC — received a letter from Mayor Michael Bloomberg and City Council Speaker Christine Quinn asking for its help.

Would Urban Green be willing to convene a group of experts from the building industry to take a look at the city's building codes and recommend how they could be changed to promote sustainable practices?

"Greening our codes will be necessary if we are to achieve our citywide goals for sustainability and greenhouse gas reductions," explained the leaders, "and we hope that you will partner with us in this effort."

They didn't have to ask twice.

## Green Leaders

Compared to some other cities, New York City is refreshingly progressive in its stance toward green building, explains Russell Unger, LEED AP, executive director of Urban Green.

"The real estate industry in New York has a long history of being among the leaders of the real estate industry in the country. It's no different with green building," says Unger. "If you look at the commitment to green building among the major owners and developers in New York City, it's as strong as or stronger than any other city in the country."

Within a week of the city's request, Urban Green held the kickoff meeting of the NYC Green Codes Task Force. What followed was 18 months of intense work by more than 200 task force members: architects; engineers; lighting, landscape architects and interior designers; owners and developers; contractors; code specialists; attorneys; waste haulers; public health experts and many, many others.

"We didn't work in isolation," says Unger. "City policymakers and agencies actively participated on the task force, too. So by the time the report was finished, most of the people who needed to be involved to take it to the next level were already part of the discussion."

On Feb. 1, 2010, Urban Green delivered its 600-page report of 111 recommendations to green the city's codes to waiting hands.

## The Power of Codes

“By the time our initial report came out, we sensed a lot would happen,” says Unger. “But what we’ve seen has certainly been on the higher end of our expectations.”

The Green Codes Task Force Anniversary Report, issued in February 2012, celebrates the many successes of the task force report over the previous 2 years: A full third of its recommendations were either enacted or were undergoing active review. Twenty-nine were incorporated into laws and practices.

And those 29 code changes alone are estimated to have far-reaching environmental impact in the city. By 2030, they will

- reduce citywide carbon emissions by almost 5 percent,
- lower daily water consumption by 30 billion gallons (the equivalent of 30 Central Park Reservoirs), and
- divert 100,000 tons of asphalt from landfills annually.

The task force anniversary report likened building codes to a city’s DNA. Codes are “rules that are applied many times over in literally millions of design and development decisions every year,” it explained, “having an exponential impact on how the city functions.”

“The analogy’s a good one because codes are both super technical and kind of difficult to get right. But they’re also super powerful,” says Unger. “You make a little change in a code, and you see it repeated again and again and again.”

## Behind-the-Scenes Nitty Gritty

With more than 1,000 members, Urban Green enjoys advantages that other USGBC chapters might not: a 13-person staff, a city willing to take necessary steps toward sustainability and hundreds of task force volunteers eager to guide the city in that direction.

Still, the work was tedious.

In the beginning, technical committees met almost daily to brainstorm both barriers to green building in existing code and enhancements that could be added. Then, ideas were prioritized, proposals drafted and code language written. Afterward came months of reviews, edits, more edits, some fleshing out and refining, and numerous meetings involving all sorts of city agencies and experts that led to more feedback and edits.

Like DNA, building code is complicated.

“There are thousands and thousands of pages of building codes. It’s not easy to dig in there and find where there’s opportunity to tweak standards to the better,” says Unger. “But, if you do, the return is tremendous.”

## Improving Your Community’s DNA

For fellow USGBC chapters wanting to green their local building codes, Unger advises, first, to focus on removing barriers to green building. Barriers are often the result of out-of-date language that needs a more inclusive update.

For example, New York City zoning laws allowed builders to store mechanical equipment on rooftops and listed specific items they could keep there. Solar panels and fuel cells, however, didn’t make the cut.

“It wasn’t that the city didn’t like those things,” says Unger. “But when the zoning rules were written, they didn’t exist.”

Another outdated regulation specified lighting standards in multifamily residential buildings in terms of incandescent light bulb wattage. With the help of its green codes task force, New York City updated the code to specify light output instead.

Second, consider green code changes that would protect health. Under a recently passed law, carpet sold and installed in New York City must meet strict standards for chemical emissions by July 2013.

Third, coaches Unger, consider cost.

“That’s a major factor. If something costs a lot, be sure there’s a strong payback that justifies changing the code for everyone,” he says. “Be strategic about the issues you take on.”

Take a look at green code language proposed by bodies like the NYC Green Codes Task Force and the International Code Council, and use them as guides.

Through it all, keep in mind the value of hard work and teamwork.

“It really was the entire green building industry in New York coming together to make this thing possible,” reflects Unger. “And the work isn’t over. It still continues as the city considers more of our recommendations.”

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